

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Robert A. Stebbins, *The Committed Reader: Reading for Utility, Pleasure, and Fulfillment in the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013, 143 pp., \$40.00 paper (978-0-8108-8596-7).

I was at once intrigued by the title of Robert Stebbins' *The Committed Reader*, especially having received the book for review in the midst of reading undergraduate final exams. The full title, suggesting a focus on the various types of reading we engage in and encounter in the 21st century, deepened my interest. After all, most of what we sociologists do involves the varieties of reading included in the subtitle: our research and teaching spread across reading for utility, pleasure, and fulfilment; we strive to teach our students how to go beyond the mere Google-style of reading to engage with texts; and our plans for sabbatical almost always, if unofficially, include finally reading "for pleasure." It is unfortunate, then, that the lead of the title regarding the "committed reader" ends up disappearing in this work, leaving it more encyclopaedic in its approach to reading and readership than "committed."

Stebbins' approach in this work derives from a combination of library and information studies and the application of his own "serious leisure perspective." That perspective, which starts from a definition of leisure as "uncoerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in either a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both)" (p. 24), is then opened up to classify three approaches to leisure activity (casual leisure, serious pursuits, or project-based leisure). After briefly addressing casual and project-based forms of leisure, Stebbins goes on to break down the category of serious pursuits into "serious leisure," with three subcategories (amateur, volunteer, and hobbyist), and devotee work.

The rest of the work of this book reflects the application of Stebbins' serious leisure perspective to the "contact points" between a variety of sociological factors and the types of reading mentioned in the title. So, for instance, Stebbins' analysis of pleasure reading engages with a variety of purposes for reading, including entertainment, imaginative play, as a trigger for conversation, for sensory stimulation, for relaxation, and for information or knowledge. Included in the discussion of each of these purposes are a range of sociological touch points, including the classification of forms of fiction and nonfiction pleasurable reading materials,

the roles of entertainment and “edutainment” in society, and the social-psychological and societal benefits of pleasurable reading. Most of the data that provides the basis for the analysis here is drawn from either governmental surveys and censuses or from a wide range of secondary research in the sociology of culture and library and information studies areas. The approach to the three other forms of reading proceeds in a similar manner. It should be noted that I would call Stebbins’ serious leisure perspective taxonomic rather than phenomenological for one very important reason — this work is oriented more to the identification of various types and constitutive elements of action (in this case, reading) rather than the subjective experience of those actional forms. This work reads more akin to a Weberian approach, *à la* his analysis of the ideal-types of social action, or the work of Diderot and the Encyclopedists, rather than approaching its topic in a manner closer to Merleau-Ponty or Schutz.

It is precisely in this approach that I believe both the strength and the weakness of Stebbins’ work lie. Its strength is this taxonomic effort. For readers who are interested in such a breakdown of the various approaches to the act of reading and their sociological and social-psychological touchpoints, this work will be a very useful contribution to their libraries. The intersection of Stebbins’ serious leisure perspective and library and information studies will also be of interest to LIS scholars, as it could present a useful guide for understanding and analyzing the approaches readers bring to bear on the act of reading and, to extrapolate wildly, of potentially reorganizing institutional and informational resources so as to meet the needs of readers more effectively.

However, to less taxonomically oriented sociologists, such as sociologists of culture, Stebbins’ work will be less useful. Obviously, any effort to understand the ways in which societal structures affect the gathering and processing of information — especially in the post-WikiLeaks and PRISM era — is a useful endeavour. As a reader who has always envisioned the ideal role of sociological works to be a fostering of relationships between writers, readers, and social problems (and solutions), I was left very definitely wanting throughout this work. The “committed reader” in Stebbins’ book is not a reader with the same experience of commitment as that of Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce-que la littérature?*. Rather, Stebbins’ committed reader is one who has crafted a lifestyle characterized by the action of reading — but for what reason? What meaning is drawn from the act? Are Stebbins’ “purposes” and “benefits” of reading as a social action analogous to what phenomenologists would consider “meaning”? In other words, committed reading, like other passion-driven activities, has an *excess* that cannot be contained within or identified by

any kind of extrinsic taxonomy, and it is precisely this excess that Stebbins' notion of commitment is missing. In part, I believe this to be the result of the absence of primary data in this work. Because there is no *person* behind Stebbins' "reader" of whatever type — just StatsCan data or another author's findings — something significant is lost in the presentation of the analysis here.

Likewise, as a sociological examination of reading, or even the touchpoints between reading and other social structures, Stebbins' work seems to be missing a palpable notion of the social, at least in relation to what I see as two of the finest books in the field. Wendy Griswold's *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton University Press, 2000) remains to my mind the paragon of sociological approaches to reading. What Stebbins attempts with his taxonomic approach to the topic, Griswold captures as a real experience of the social and sociological impacts upon reading, looking at the effects of weak electrical infrastructure and overcrowded housing conditions, for example, on the ability of Nigerians to engage in reading in the way that we presume North Americans do. A work that is closer in approach, though I believe more successful, is Henry Petroski's *The Book on the Bookshelf* (Vintage Books, 2000), an erudite historical exploration of the relationship between the physical form of books, the architectural forms of structures to house books, and the modes of organizing the information contained therein. Where Stebbins seems to hold up at the analytical line between societal touchpoint and sociological impact, Petroski charges past, arguing, for example, that the scholarly model of reading stems in part from the size and rarity of illuminated manuscripts, the need to secure them to desks, and the construction of medieval libraries with windows along the southern axis in order to ensure that lighted candles or torches would be unnecessary. It is the engagement with the role of experience and a greater introduction of the social in these kinds of analysis that I believe would have ensured that Stebbins' readers did not face such a disconnect between the title of the work and its contents.

None of this is to say that *The Committed Reader* is not a worthwhile read. It represents a real contribution to the efforts to bring the sociology of culture and leisure studies in contact with LIS studies and to identify the changes in the act of reading that have been influenced by societal changes in the early 21st century. I believe, though, that Stebbins' book would have been a more beneficial contribution if it had followed through on its promise of understanding the "committed reader," giving us an insight into the social-psychological and meaning-laden experiences and factors involved in how we read today.

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