

“Words with Friends”: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*

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READING ISN'T WHAT IT WAS. AS WE ENTER THE “LATE AGE OF PRINT,” E-BOOKS ARE STILL LESS COMMON THAN “P-BOOKS” (PRINTED BOOKS), but the balance is quickly changing, especially in the world of academic publishing (Striphas xii). While many lament the loss of the p-book’s materiality, texts have become more lively as a result of digitization: textual-production platforms like blogging let writers and readers interact with each other and create intimate social relationships. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick found while writing her book *Planned Obsolescence* using *CommentPress*, an online platform that enables readers’ commenting, writing can become a more social and creative process when done in dialogue with readers. This turn to the social in writing parallels a turn to the social in media generally. Thus, it makes sense to evaluate not how far our devices are taking us from paper—the answer is already pretty far—but rather how digital media are creating new social valences of reading.

However, the book’s new form persists in dominating conversations about the future of reading. The publishing industry insists that reading’s new platforms and apparatuses are central to or determine the reading experience, in an attempt to suture it to a discourse of futurity, as part of a still-fetishized culture of product innovation. This is a tendency that we must resist. Not only are incessant hardware upgrades bad for the earth and our budgets, but the noisy launches of the iterations of the Kindle, Nook, iPad, and other tablets for reading distract us from digital reading’s more extensive alterations to the ways we read. Like social media generally, digital reading is migrating toward a service-based rather than hardware-based model of consumption, which is why online social networks like *Goodreads* are important sites of study for literary scholars. People who study reading today must be interested in how the use of digital reading devices has transformed reading and discourse about it, but focusing on the devices themselves is short-sighted. It is still more likely that you will be asked “*What* are you reading?” than “*How* are you reading?” or “What are you reading *on* these days?”

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Of course, reading platforms matter, for they permit or restrict reading options. The devices that we use inflect what we are reading—the catalog of books available for purchase on the iPad differs from those on the Kindle. However, recommendations from other users trump advertising as the favored vector for consumption, as *Amazon* and other recommendation-based retailers learned long ago. Books have always been a means of social networking, and such networking is characteristic of a generation of users that the popular press has dubbed “digital natives” and “millennials” and David Theo Goldberg calls “Webbies.” For Webbies “network incessantly, independent of place,” and reading should now be viewed not as antithetical to social networking—solitary, private, outside capital—but as commodified and digital (453).

Digital-media pundits have proclaimed that the future and present of media are social, as industries, advertisers, and our friends are networked seamlessly and intuitively. Publishing is no different. E-books are more ephemeral than p-books, and those that can’t leverage social networks are likely to fail.¹ Khoi Vinh, design director for the online *New York Times* from 2006 to 2010, eloquently makes this now commonsensical claim in his popular blog *Subtraction*. He writes that the *New Yorker’s* iPad version is a failure not because of an ungraceful or unworkable transition from the static page to the dynamic screen—the apparatus is not to blame—but because it is “an impediment to my normal content consumption habits. I couldn’t email, blog, tweet or quote from the app, to say nothing of linking away to other sources—for magazine apps like these, the world outside is just a rumor to be denied.” According to Vinh, the iPad’s “full-screen, single-window posture” mimics the form of the codex at the expense of digital reading’s real payoff: enhanced kinds of annotation and of connection and interactivity with other platforms and, most important, with the people

on those platforms—and not just people but “friends,” as the points on our social graph online are now generically known. Vinh concludes, “Social media, if it’s not already obvious to everyone, is going to continue to change everything—including publishing. And it’s a no-brainer to me that content consumption is going to be intimately if not inextricably linked with your social graph.”

Goodreads, the largest social network site “for readers,” with over six million users, does everything that Vinh says digital-reading technologies need to do and more. It offers all the conventions of social networking—an in-box, notifications, and a status ticker. Classified as a social cataloging site, it links promiscuously to other social networks—*Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Gmail*, *Yahoo!*, and *Hotmail*—and automatically generates invitations to existing friends on these networks (fig. 1). *Goodreads* is an exemplary Web 2.0 business: it is grandly imperial, inviting participants to comment, buy, blog, rank, and reply through a range of devices, networks, and services. Like *Facebook* (and unlike *Myspace*), it is a tightly controlled visual regime, less quirky corner bookstore than sleek megastore; as Wai Chee Dimock notes of *Facebook*, *Goodreads* is visually and “procedurally bland” (734).

Ambitiously mobile, *Goodreads* has apps for the Android, iPhone, and iPad, and its iPhone app sports a barcode reader to facilitate users’ entering of books into their virtual bookshelf. The pleasure of scanning paper books from a home bookshelf into the iPhone app, hearing its gentle “bing,” and viewing the vividly colored book covers as they pop up in an expanding palette of readerly acquisition provides the psychic payoff of shopping without the cost. *Goodreads* user profiles feature virtual bookshelves to be displayed to friends, creating a bibliocentric as well as an egocentric network of public reading performance. The site’s slogan, “reading is more fun when shared,” emphasizes these and other pleasures of readerly sociality. While

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Facebook offers up our list of friends as visual evidence of our social graph, letting us create and display our connections, *Goodreads* foregrounds reading as a spectacle of collecting.

Early digital-media theorists prophesied that electronic reading would engender new forms of textual consumption and pleasure based on random-access or hypertextual narratives in which readers could navigate at will. As Fitzpatrick notes, however, this did not come to pass, because hypertextual reading is disorienting and often frustrating. She reports that her students were not fans of electronic literature (97), and Lev Manovich's critique of hypertext's false interactivity is as valid today as it was in 2000.² *Goodreads* invites users to navigate not in books but in its catalog, to create new catalogs, and to enjoy other people's collections. When I have asked others what they've been reading, I've often received links to *Goodreads* lists. The three bookshelves that all users start with are entitled "read," "currently-reading," and the conveniently shopping-list-like "to-read," thus organizing books around a temporality of consumption rather than genre, nation, electronic or analog form, or language.

Goodreads shelves remediate earlier reading cultures where books were displayed in the home as signs of taste and status. As Ted Striphas writes in *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*, books displayed in bookcases have always been sites of public display and sharing, a form of public consumption that produces and publicizes a reading self. Cruising a bookshelf at a party is a licensed form of surveillance. The immateriality of electronic books poses a challenge to this aspect of literary and domestic culture, for, as Striphas writes, "ebooks attempt to make bookcases—and hence the way of life with which they are associated—irrelevant" (182). *Goodreads* addresses this lack by inviting users to fill their virtual shelves with images of books for others to see, digitizing the bookcase as well as its books.

Users sometimes refer to the role of digital devices such as Kindles and Nooks by creating bookshelves with titles like “read on my kindle” or “audiobook.” Yet the reading apparatus takes a backseat to the site’s main purpose: to provide users with familiar tools that encourage them to perform their identities as readers in a public and networked forum. Like other virtual communities, *Goodreads* has both an official terms-of-use agreement and informal community policies and customs that govern use of the network. It also features tools that let users gauge taste compatibility with other users, as on *Last.fm*, the popular site for streaming and recommending music. And it is not uncommon for popular *Goodreads* reviewers with many “followers” to admonish prospective “friends” to use these tools before requesting a friendship. *Goodreads* is both a literary network and a fan community, and its design, features, and user conventions reflect this hybrid purpose and heritage. Users flag reviews that describe book plots in detail as “spoilers,” and individual profiles can be “followed,” à la *Twitter*, so that notices of new postings can be part of the news feed. Data about how popular each book is can be found at the top of its page, and reader tastes reflect the traditional literary canon more closely than one might expect. On 12 December 2011, for example, Gary Shteyngart’s popular *Super Sad True Love Story* had 8,143 ratings, 2,054 reviews, and an aggregate rating of 3.43 (out of 5), and Elizabeth Bowen’s more obscure but comfortably canonized *The Death of the Heart* had 816 ratings, 103 reviews, and a rating of 3.62.

Scholars looking to study reading culture “in the wild” will be rewarded by a close study of *Goodreads*. Lively, provocative, and often surprisingly personal conversations several screens long can occur among “friends” and strangers using books as pretexts for exchange. I was assigned to read *The Death of the Heart* in a college course on the novel, and I admire the book more than any other

because it resisted and continues to resist my best efforts at understanding. The novel generated a fascinating thread of vernacular literary criticism on *Goodreads*. Many reviewers remarked on the novel’s incisive critique of the class system in England and supported their claims with citations and skillful close readings of particular passages. Many provided more affective responses: “this is a shatteringly vivid novel. I think about it all the time”; “I can’t believe Portia, the child of this story. And, MATCHETT [the maid]! And, the adults here—ARGH.” Others offered insightful character analysis: “They are rather horrid snobs who hate everything, and never say what they mean.” The virtual form of these literary conversations seemed to invite information about where and how the book had been consumed; several users remarked that they had been steered to this and other books through a book club, a college course, or a BBC movie adaptation. *Goodreads* hosts its own conversations for newly released or popular books, often featuring the author in a live chat; many comment threads have the tone of a book club, and users often mention how their physically copresent clubs discussed a book.

Goodreads is an amazing tool, a utopia for readers. But by availing ourselves of its networked virtual bookshelves to collect and display our readerliness in a postprint age, we have become objects to be collected, by *Goodreads* and its myriad commercial partners. The description of each book offers the option to “get a copy” at Barnes and Noble, online bookstores, and libraries (a link to *WorldCat*, as a nod to the world of nonretail book cataloging and consumption). By submitting our favorite book titles, readerly habits, ratings, comments, and replies (or “UGC,” user-generated content) to our social network of readers, we are both collecting and being collected under a new regime of controlled consumerism. *Goodreads* shares its data with its partners, although, as it stresses in

its privacy policy, the data are not personal. As Striphas writes, “[A] society of controlled consumption is premised on the transformation of the consumer from subject to object of capitalist accumulation” (183). *Goodreads* and other Web 2.0 services are successful not because they have accomplished this task but because we are unaware of it. This tight integration of readerly community with commerce is an absolute given, an indispensable feature of reading in the digital age, so banal as to be unremarked on. As Goldberg writes, Webbies are more like moderns than they are like ancients in this way: “They are radically promiscuous, inheriting capital’s voraciousness and, as such, prone or at least easily available to commerce. So Webbies pay deference to virtual community, to participation, to co-creation and re-creation” (452).

Goodreads turns the reader into a worker, a content producer, and in this it extends the labor of reading and networking into the crowd.³ In some of print’s earlier ages, books cost money, but talking about them with friends was free. Today books are free through *Google Books* and *Internet Archive* and, much to the consternation of publishers, through torrent sites like *Pirate Bay* and *Media Fire*, but we pay to create readerly communities on social networks like *Goodreads*. We pay with our attention and our readerly capital, our LOLs, rankings, conversations, and insights into narrative, character, and literary tradition.

Whereas Striphas’s work shows us how digital books are still commodities, *Goodreads* shows us how social networking about books has become a commodity, a business that lays claim to all user content, admits no liability, and reserves the right to terminate user profiles and data for any reason or no reason. Our carefully maintained *Goodreads* bookshelves, some of which contain thousands of books, can be abruptly disappeared. As the cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling put it in a dark and gloomy keynote

lecture at the 2009 Reboot conference in Copenhagen, it is less the digital bookshelf, library, book club, or virtual coffeehouse that social networks refer to than the high-tech favela that is social networking. Built on "play labor"—the recreational activity of sharing our labor as readers, writers, and lovers of books and inviting our friends from the social graph to come, look, buy, and share—*Goodreads* efficiently captures the value of our recommendations, social ties, affective networks, and collections of friends and books. *Goodreads* bookshelves are unlike real bookshelves not because the books are not real but because they are not really ours.

Computers have been part of the ecology of reading since well before the Kindle. As the media activist and counterculture guru Michael Shamberg wrote in his manifesto *Guerilla Television* in 1971, people "see more and more books being sold and conclude that, despite television, print is still very much alive. This is true. But as a psychological environment, print is dead. . . . Rather, electronic reality is what's shaping print. Books manifest this in both internal style and form." Shamberg, a student of Marshall McLuhan's, was mistaken in predicting the rise of "staccato anthologies and random access books, especially magazines" as the "central print form" and the demise of the "ponderous and linear developmental novel" (Shamberg and Raindance Corporation 29). However, his claims about the "electronic morphology" of the catalog as an ascendant literary form describe virtual bookshelves like *Goodreads*. Shamberg discusses the counterculture bible *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which not only embodied "random access" (and foresaw the World Wide Web, according to Fred Turner's wonderful cultural history of early computing's hippie values) but also functioned like a social network or a Web 2.0 company because it was a recommendation engine (Turner 327). As Shamberg wrote, the contents of *The Whole Earth Catalog* exemplified the new form of

media because “people write about and recommend books and methods they’ve used themselves” (Shamberg and Raindance Corporation 24). Shamberg did not anticipate that the social media we would come to use to organize parties, put up pictures of protests, or broadcast ourselves would also be engines of capital. Indeed, a persistent theme of *Guerrilla Television* is the importance of sustainability as a necessary part of any media ecology.

Goodreads uses algorithms to rank and evaluate books and organize them into ego-centric networks. Seen in this light, it’s a folksonomic, vernacular platform for literary criticism and conversation—that most esteemed of discursive modes—that is open to all, solving the problem of locked-down content that pay-to-read academic publishing reproduces. On the other hand, open access to a for-profit site like *Goodreads* has always exacted a price—loss of privacy, friction-free broadcasting of our personal information, the placing of user content in the service of commerce, and the operationalization and commodification of reading as an algocratic practice.

Goodreads makes reading promiscuous, networked, and above all social. A commenter on Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* used the update feature of reviews to record every time he laughed out loud while reading it. This way of sharing the pleasure of reading is surely as effective as writing an eloquent analysis. Yet, as *Goodreads*’s terms of use remind us, “[y]ou are solely responsible for your User Content that you upload, publish, display, link to or otherwise make available (hereinafter, ‘post’) on the Service, and you agree that we are only acting as a passive conduit for your online distribution and publication of your User Content” (sec. 2). Now more than ever, literary scholars must bring their skills to bear on digitally networked reading. Researchers who are versed in reading’s many cultures, economies, and conditions of reception know that it is never possible for a read-

ing platform to be a “passive conduit.” For reading has always been social, and reading’s economies, cultures of sharing, and circuits of travel have never been passive.

In his essay “The Future of Writing,” the Czech-Brazilian media theorist Vilém Flusser writes, “Thus, in fact, we may discern, at present, two possible futures of writing; it will either become a critique of techno-imagination (which means an unmasking of the ideologies hiding behind a technical progress that has become autonomous of human decisions) or it will become the production of pretexts for techno-imagination (a planning for that technical progress)” (69). Let us hope that reading’s digital future will include the kind of critique and unmasking of the techno-imaginary’s hidden ideologies that readers and writers deserve.

NOTES

1. Older reading platforms (like the first-generation Kindle) may be worth studying because they were so quickly obsolescent. As Montfort and Bogost demonstrate in *Racing the Beam*, the first volume of MIT Press’s series Platform Studies, the Atari video computer system can tell us a lot about why early video games looked the way they did and thus why video games look the way they do now. Literary studies will increasingly converge with platform studies as academic and trade books are published only in digital formats. Juhasz’s *Learning from YouTube*, for example, has an ISBN but is categorized as a “video-book” and cannot be read on paper.

2. As Manovich writes in *The Language of New Media*, hyperlinking restricts readerly choice by creating a limited set of paths to other texts. This limitation is hidden from the reader, who tends to focus on the options offered rather than those denied. Worse, it encourages users to “mistake the designer’s mind for their own,” creating both false consciousness and false interactivity (61).

3. And behind this labor of sharing reading lies another type of hidden work: book-warehouse picking. Digital bookselling is a more exploitative business than many *Amazon* consumers realize. The *Huffington Post* writer Bianca Bosker asserted in 2010 that conditions in *Amazon* factories were harsh and that worker productiv-

ity was extensively tracked with a degree of exactitude previously unimaginable but now immanent in all jobs.

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Find Friends From

-  Gmail
-  Hotmail
-  yahoo
-  Facebook
-  Twitter
-  Friends of friends

Challenge Question

Add a challenge question to limit friend requests to people that know you!