

Themed Section: ‘Interviews and Reading’

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Interviewing has become a major method in studies of reading, as in audience and reception studies more broadly, but it is rarely reflected upon beyond brief methodological discussions in individual articles and books. This Themed Section brings together a sample of recent and current projects which use interviews to investigate reading – including the reading of books, newspapers, and comics, in social and individual situations. It brings together different approaches to collecting and analysing readers’ talk about reading, through a series of studies which foreground readers’ narratives. To frame the articles historically and to draw out connections between them, this Introduction traces a history of investigating and interviewing ‘ordinary readers’ – and audiences more broadly – and considers some disciplinary contexts and methodological implications of this practice. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to the methodology of interviewing but rather a means of beginning to reflect on where we have been and are now with interviewing readers, and on the limitations and possibilities of talking about reading. We also argue that interviews have come to challenge disciplinary assumptions about reading and readers. Our overall aim is to encourage the examination of a single meeting point in the entangled interdisciplinarity of research into reading.

1. A history of reading, and audience studies

From the 1980s onwards book historians led by the American cultural historian Robert Darnton began to think much more about the production and distribution of print publications *and* their reception by readers. One of the ways in which Darnton’s key essay,

'What is the History of Books?' (1982), differentiated this growing field of knowledge from previous book studies was a new attention to 'the most ordinary sort of books, because they wanted to discover the literary experience of ordinary readers.'¹ It was a theme Darnton would return to, including in his collection of essays *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (1990), in which he reprinted the earlier piece and added a new chapter: 'First Steps Toward the History of Reading'.² Darnton, like other early modern historians, was interested in how new ideas were spread amongst a growing reading public.

The 1970s had already seen literary critics taking an increased interest in reading. Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser are among the best known to have developed theories of reading as an interpretive activity, examining how meaning is made from texts. These theorists had a crucial role in challenging the New Criticism that had dominated much of literary studies since the 1930s, which focused on analysing the objective meaning of the text in itself. New Critics considered the main purpose of criticism as being to unlock the pre-given meaning of 'the text', discouraging any kind of individual responses. The emerging interest in processes of interpreting the meaning of texts was crucial, then, in opening up approaches to reading, although these early theorists of reading did not engage with 'ordinary readers' – a term that usually refers to non-professional readers – so much as take themselves and their academic communities as model readers. Darnton commented that book historians could make use of literary theoretical concepts such as of interpretive communities,³ but also noted a lack of engagement with how reading is historically contingent, changing over time for different types of readers. Historians were showing how in various periods and places reading was more likely to be out loud or in groups, for example, or done in secret, intensively or speedily.⁴ Darnton nevertheless strongly argued that book historians should be interdisciplinary in their methods, learning from both literature and history, from economics, bibliography, and sociology, including the 'sociological strain in historical writing' about the reading (and nonreading) of the English working class by writers such as Richard Altick and Richard Hoggart.⁵

Despite Darnton's and others' often repeated call, studies of the reception of books by 'ordinary readers' developed slowly. In 1992 Jonathan Rose claimed that hardly anyone had systematically addressed the question that Altick had raised in *The English Common Reader* (1957): 'How do texts change the minds and lives of common (i.e., nonprofessional) readers?'⁶ He pointed to an assumption shared by some critics that the common reader receives whatever is in the text 'without studying the responses of any actual reader other than the critic himself.'⁷ Reader-response critics had mostly not undertaken the kind of empirical or 'sociological investigation' previously urged by Darnton. As late as 2002, Christine Pawley could observe that the 'reader' remained 'unexplicated' in relative terms to the 'text', although the history of the book was 'shifting attention from texts to readers'. Pawley referred to an evident 'need to explore not only how we conceptualize the ideal reader but also how we can uncover the specific reading practices of actual readers', living in specific times and places.⁸

Part of the difficulty and delay in getting to know what ‘common readers’ made of books was due to the evidence available.⁹ Interviews, questionnaires and other kinds of sociological and ethnographic methods were not typically available for book historians as they could only enable them to study historical reading within the memories of living people. Pawley discussed various methods of data-collection, including the use of collective records such as the elite women’s Shakespearean club, but observed that working-class individuals and groups were less likely to leave documentary traces.¹⁰ Historical reading is notoriously elusive. Readers’ tastes have been inferred through book-counting - using library catalogues for example - but such methods have also attracted criticism because it may be impossible to know whether a copy of a book in any collection was actually read, or even opened or noticed at all. Even if we can assume that somebody read a particular book, ‘To pass from the *what* to the *how* of reading is an extremely difficult step’, as Robert Darnton’s oft-cited phrase points out.¹¹ To consider how people read, book historians have also turned to other kinds of documents, including autobiographical narratives. For Stephen Colclough, in his essay ‘Readers: Books and Biography’ (2007), diaries and other such documents ‘provide vital evidence about reading as an everyday practice [...] that cannot be recovered from inert sources such as publishers’ records.’¹²

A main source of evidence used to investigate ‘ordinary’ reading historically has been memoirs, which have increasingly been examined alongside oral history interviews. An early, pioneering outlier here was David Vincent, who first assembled autobiographical writing by nineteenth-century British workers to reconstruct a history of how readers responded to texts, in his *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (1981). Vincent noted the growth of oral history since the 1970s but pointed out its limited historical scope. ‘As we look back down the silent centuries from the end of the nineteenth’, wrote Vincent, ‘it is to the attempts of working men and women to write down their life-histories that we must turn if we are to hear their own judgements on their past.’¹³ A number of studies from the 1990s onwards have similarly utilised sources of life-writing, and also, for more recent periods, oral history. Martyn Lyons’s *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (2008) provides statistical information (such as the bestselling titles of early nineteenth-century France) for a well-grounded investigation into ‘the less tangible and often unquantifiable study of reading history’ using both life writing and oral histories.¹⁴ Like Colclough, Lyons notes that life stories can provide information that quantitative information cannot: ‘In diaries, autobiographies, and oral testimonies, individual readers describe their reading experiences and allow us to appreciate their enormous diversity.’¹⁵ In narrating their life stories, the working-class autodidacts studied by Lyons ‘rarely failed to give a description of their reading, and many of them outlined the detailed reading programmes which had guided and improved them’, illustrating the important role of reading in the quest for ‘self-improvement’.¹⁶ Lyons explains how he has consistently exploited a wide range of autobiographical sources, from ‘nineteenth-century workers’ autobiographies’ to ‘the recorded oral testimonies solicited from elderly readers about their childhood and family memories.’¹⁷ Regarding the latter, Lyons had conducted an oral history

study with Lucy Taksa, conducting 80 interviews to investigate reading experiences for *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading 1890-1930* (1992).

Such interests in working-class reading, or 'history from below',¹⁸ dovetailed with the aims of many projects using oral history since it gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s to unearth previously marginalised and everyday histories. Book historians like Vincent, Lyons, and Rose got to a 'history from below' in their use of working-class writing that can in more recent periods also be accessed through oral history and other kinds of empirical research methods.¹⁹ The gradual emergence of working-class and everyday reading histories which began to take shape from the 1980s onwards runs parallel with a much wider interest in the experiences of different groups of 'ordinary' and marginalised people across oral history, cultural studies and other disciplinary areas.

While Vincent and others were focusing on working-class memoirs, usually produced by men, Janice Radway and other feminist critics were beginning to conduct studies of middle- and working-class women readers.²⁰ Radway used ethnographic methods (including interviews) to study contemporary fans of romance novels for *Reading the Romance* (1984). In a later introduction to this work (1991), Radway described how she had grappled with the literary theoretical work on 'the inscribed, ideal, or model reader' while also developing an ethnographic understanding of how reading must vary across space and time. Radway also noted here that she had not at the time of her research been aware of the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), set up by Hoggart and influenced by his approach to working-class readers in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), but had since become aware of their comparable interests in talking to everyday audiences.

Studies of reading as well as of audiences more broadly often position themselves with respect to a tradition of cultural studies that emerged from the CCCS.²¹ Radway's 1991 introduction points to the broad range of audience studies being produced by students and lecturers at the Centre, including Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads* (1982) and David Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980), and noted some points of comparison with their work on television audiences and her own on romance readers. Both Radway's work and much of the work coming out of the CCCS were in large part building on and critiquing previous models of the relation between media and audiences developed in mass communication studies, models that had moved away from the idea of audiences as passive receivers to being more active and diverse consumers. As Radway put it, her work shared with that of Morley and others a concern with 'questions about the degree of freedom audiences demonstrate in their interaction with media messages', investigated in part by talking to audiences.²² Among book historians, Rose also observed this focal point where in a discussion of Kaja Silverman's work on cinema, he commented that 'films and books can be manipulative; but it should be equally obvious that we cannot know whether or when they succeed without somehow questioning the audience.'²³ Much as in book history, one of the objections to previous work in both media and mass communication studies was that little had been done to 'test effects models by investigating the responses of actual audiences', as James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein have put it.²⁴ Scholars in these fields increasingly

turned to ethnographic and qualitative methods – including questionnaires, interviews, group discussions – to ‘provide ‘thick descriptions’ of both the viewing and reading experience and the social and cultural conditions and practices that constitute particular contexts of reception.’²⁵

A group of students and lecturers at the CCCS, Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O’Rourke and Chris Weedon, specifically used interviews with readers, writing up their investigation in a chapter of *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class: ‘Some Women Reading’* (1985). Challenging literary canonical periodisations, this study came to include mass-market genres, working-class and ‘middlebrow’ fiction, and women’s writing, along with an investigation of institutional contexts such as schooling that help to determine how these texts were read. While Radway’s interviews were part of a comprehensive ethnographic investigation of middle-class women in mid-West American town, Batsleer *et al*’s interviews, with young women at school and women looking after children at home, were presented as incomplete beginnings with the aim of ‘inaugurating a larger ethnographic study of reading’, but they are nevertheless comparable in their move beyond theories of reading which relied on ‘some wholly abstract entity called ‘the reader’’.²⁶ Batsleer *et al*’s study is also comparable to Radway’s with regard to their findings – which they also compare to Morley’s and Hobson’s – that women’s reading is not only a form of passive regulation but also to some extent a means of resistance to their domestic lives.

An increasing number of studies using qualitative methods began to emerge as a new generation of researchers sought out the experiences of nonprofessional readers, another feminist example in literary studies being Helen Taylor’s *Scarlett’s Women* (1989), for which she invited fans of *Gone With the Wind* to complete questionnaires about their experiences and memories of the book and film (both in the UK and US).²⁷ This trend of gathering evidence from readers has continued through the development of resources such as the Reading Experience Database (the Steering Committee for which was set up in 1992; it was launched in 1996²⁸), and oral history projects, from Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taksa’s *Australian Readers Remember* (1992) to ‘Scottish Readers Remember’ (2006-2009), ‘Reading Sheffield’ (2014 ongoing), ‘Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers’ Life Stories’ (2014-2018) and ‘Living Libraries’ (2019-2020).²⁹ Interviews have emerged as one of the main methods of investigating ‘ordinary’ readers and audiences.

Research into reading has taken place across multiple disciplinary fields, among which we refer especially to book history, literary, cultural and media studies, and in the next section we turn to sociology. Studies of reading using interviews are also produced in departments of education and literacy, psychology, linguistics, library and information science³⁰, and although these are largely beyond the scope of this Themed Section they are also often informed by trends identified here. For example, Nadine Rosenthal, working on adult literacy, used oral history interviews in *Speaking of Reading* (1995) and, referring to reading theory from the 1980s, discussed the potential for reading as an active, creative process.³¹

In this Themed Section, then, we are bringing together seven articles that use interviews to find out more about memories, experiences, and practices of reading. The first three of these articles could be categorised most squarely as histories of reading, in that they draw on book history scholarship and demonstrate how interviews can be used as historical sources to investigate reading, even as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. These articles nevertheless overlap considerably with many studies of contemporary reading, which are more likely to involve carrying out new interviews. They share with the other articles in the Section, and with many audience and reception studies, a focus on 'ordinary', non-elite and/or historically marginalized readers – including working-class readers, women, and immigrants – and on reading as an activity. We are as interested in what people do with books and other printed materials (for example hiding behind as well as escaping into books and newspapers) as in what they read and their interpretations of that material. The final article discusses interviews with literary agents, editors and publishers, to indicate how interviews can be useful not only for discussing 'ordinary' and marginalised readers but also for engaging with professional readers – whose engagement with books is often fan-like (fans being 'a type of 'ordinary' reader') – thereby simultaneously gaining insight into the production of books. We thereby return to the field of book history in its broader concern with books from production to reception, indicating how interviews can be used across the field. And more broadly still, although our focus is on readers and reading, the use of interviews is of course much more widespread across audience and reception studies; many of the methodological points raised in this Section are applicable beyond reading studies.

2. Interviewing readers and audiences

The interview as a method grew rapidly at the same time as the turn to readers, although it also has a longer history. Social researchers had used interviews since the nineteenth century, as in the case of Henry Mayhew's investigations of London's poor, including their reading practices.³² Mayhew interviewed and quoted from individuals at some length, but his semi-scientific journalism barely articulated methods such as of interviewee selection, questioning or recording. By the 1930s interviewing methods were much further developed, as interviews became a prominent tool in the professionalisation of sociology, increasingly being used to capture information on a quantitative scale.³³ These fed into some studies of reading particularly in library research. Douglas Waples and Ralph W. Tyler's *What People Want to Read About* (1931) is credited with introducing 'stringent social science methods to the study of reading and librarianship.'³⁴ In his work with the Chicago Graduate Library School, Waples went on to direct further studies of readers, including one of 6,600 people in Chicago who in 1933-1934 were interviewed or given questionnaires to find out about their reading over the previous two-week period. The results were primarily statistical, such as the finding that 28.6% of the books read were from the public library.³⁵ Among the various studies following on from this work, Ruth Strang's *Exploration in Reading Patterns* (1942)

combined quantitative and qualitative research with a leaning toward the latter in her use of case studies. Through her study of 112 readers, involving vocabulary and reading tests as well as interviews, Strang identified correlations in her data through which she established hypotheses that required ‘further testing’, such as between high vocabulary scores and reading preferences for ‘literary and scientific types of article’. Many of the interview questions elicited yes/no answers or short answers, such as ‘What kinds of articles do you especially like to read?’, while the final question was more open-ended: ‘Why, in general, do you read books?’ As well as establishing statistical correlations, the interviews also revealed ‘the uniqueness of each reading pattern [...] some of the subtler and more complex relationships that cannot be studied by quantitative methods.’³⁶

By the 1980s, sociological methods of interviewing were tending to move away from structured survey interviews, the results of which, along with questionnaires, often fed into quantitative statistical studies, to more flexible, semi-structured and in-depth forms of interviewing. Interviews became a favoured method for data collection in qualitative research, for which methodological textbooks flourished.³⁷ This turn to qualitative methods in the social sciences fed into the early emphasis in cultural studies on such methods, along with the rise of radical history approaches, including oral history’s interests in voices from the margins and the history of the everyday and mundane. The favouring of qualitative interviews in sociology as well as in oral history and some early cultural studies clearly supported their use in studies of reading. As a sociologist, Wendy Simonds can provide a further, particularly apt example here with her *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines* (1992), which even at this point refers to how qualitative studies are often defensive of their approach, justifying why they did not take ‘what is still – regrettably – seen as the high road in sociology [...]: complex statistical analyses coupled with highly controlled interviewing procedures.’³⁸ Simonds identified the adherence of the social sciences to quantitative methodologies with the approach of New Criticism: for each, there is an uninvolved, objective scientific observer or critic whose work is to discern an objectified, verifiable reality (e.g. a text’s meaning, or who reads what). Instead, Simonds aligned her work with Radway’s and with that of the CCCS, to find out more about what people found meaningful about their reading experiences. Instead of asking pre-determined questions, Simonds followed feminist methodology developed by Anne Oakley and others, allowing the participants to shape the interviews: ‘I tried to fit the questions I wanted to ask into the women’s narratives, as they developed, rather than structuring the interviews according to my ‘schedule.’³⁹ Such a ‘bottom-up’ approach was a hallmark of many qualitative studies of readers and audiences more generally. As Annette Kuhn, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers have observed in their recent introduction to a special issue of *Memory Studies* on memory and cinemagoing, several large-scale inquiries into cinema audiences and cinemagoing since the 1990s ‘were distinctive in attempting to reconstruct cinema cultures “from below”, gathering and drawing on informant-generated source materials – the testimonies of cinemagoers themselves’.⁴⁰

In the 1980s the topical or thematic interviewing methodologies based on large surveys had dominated oral history – the ‘100 Families’ archive provides an illustrative example of this type of approach (an archive containing material on reading which we discuss in the next section and our article). By the 1990s life history approaches had become much more prevalent. While the former employed interview schedules that encouraged interview-driven encounters, the more recent approach is much more interviewee-centred. The life history approach allows for a better understanding of how the interviewee remembers, provides a greater openness, a clearer appreciation of the significance of intersubjectivity, and provides interviewees the space to identify what is important in their memories. On the other hand, the topical approach allows for greater comparison of historical information across interviews. It is too simplistic to see the change from thematic interviewing to life history interviews as one of progress, and, in practice, many if not most oral historians draw interviewing methods from both traditions. More significantly, the shift also could be read as a result of broader economic and ideological change. After the 1980s, the reduction in research funding deemed survey oral history too expensive and encouraged the use of smaller numbers of life stories. One result was that generalisability was less about the societal and more about the individual and her identarian groupings. Some oral historians, including Alexander Freund, see such a development to be in line with a neoliberal resetting of oral histories as stories.⁴¹

With the development of qualitative research methods in the social sciences, and corresponding moves in cultural studies and oral history theory, it also became increasingly apparent that interviewers have a significant role in co-constructing interviews. Radway’s retrospective introduction of 1991 is representative in acknowledging an earlier ‘preoccupation with the empiricist claims of social science [which] prevented me from recognizing fully that even what I took to be simple descriptions of my interviewees’ self-understandings were mediated if not produced by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world.’⁴² Similar moves were apparent in oral history, with increasing recognition that an interviewer does not simply allow marginalized voices to provide new facts and understandings of the past, but that intersubjective factors come into play in shaping narratives of the past. Such awareness fed into Lyons and Taksa’s *Australian Readers Remember* where they urged the oral historian not to ‘succumb’ to a ‘positivist fallacy’ of accumulating ‘hard’ data as an end in itself: ‘The presence of an interviewer means that data is never accumulated in a “neutral” fashion. [...] The subjectivity of the evidence [...] cannot be overlooked, and nor can the collaborative role of even the most disinterested interviewer.’⁴³

There are by now too many interviews with readers to name all such studies in this Introduction, but articles in this Themed Section will collectively refer to most of them. We have wanted to sketch out some of the historical and disciplinary context in which interviews with readers emerged and flourished, and to briefly recapitulate some of the key methodological moves since the 1980s. The articles collected here can thus be positioned historically and can provide in-depth illustrations and developments of some

methodological directions. Studies of reading over the past few decades, at least in book history, literary and cultural studies, have tended to use qualitative rather than quantitative interview methods, or sometimes a mixed methods approach combining both.⁴⁴ Qualitative interviews are represented in all the articles contributing to this Themed Section. Before moving on to the articles, though, we want to step back from any kind of polarisation of the quantitative and qualitative. The differences in methods and epistemological positions have often prevented cross-fertilization, but researchers more recently in both reading and audience studies have begun to consider how to use the strengths of both approaches.⁴⁵

Having painted in broad brushstrokes some trends in sociological and oral historical methods, we will next show how these apply across various disciplinary approaches to readers. The next section will briefly draw on each of the seven articles in order to bring out historical and methodological connections, to bring the authors into dialogue, and to reflect on where we are and can go next with interviews in reading research.

3. Making connections

As the previous section's brief history of interviewing indicates, interviewing methods have ranged widely. The first article takes in a diversity of types of interviews from the nineteenth century to the present, using them as historical sources. Written by colleagues working with the UK Reading Experience Database, Edmund King, Maya Palmer, and Shafquat Towheed, the article looks among and beyond its vast collection of data about reading to identify interview-based and related documents. It ranges from Mayhew's nineteenth-century interviews with London's poor to narratives of everyday life elicited by the British Mass Observation Archive in the 1930s and 1940s, and from questionnaires and interviews with first-world-war veterans in the late twentieth century to oral histories carried out as recently as 2016. Carefully considering the implications of using both synchronic and diachronic accounts of reading, King *et al*'s article indicates the wide range of interview sources available, which could encourage researchers to explore and reuse already established archives, enabling further research into 'ordinary' readers before the mid-twentieth century, as well as carrying out new interviews for more recent and contemporary periods.

For the second article, we reused a single oral history archive, produced by a team of social historians led by Paul Thompson at the University of Essex in the 1980s, 'Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988 (100 Families)'. Interviewees for this topic-based project (see above) discuss their memories of both their own and family members reading as far back as the 1920s and the Second World War and into the present that was the 1980s. As we discuss in our article, some of the questions asked of the 170 interviewees concerned reading, and the replies give us insights into the role of reading and gender in family life. As a large collection of interviews, with a cross-section of classes and regions, and with non-readers as well as readers, we argue that these interviews may to some degree allow us to circumvent problems of representativeness that

have dogged studies of reading based in written documents. The working-class memoirist was, for example, more likely to be left-leaning than other working-class readers, as Rose observes in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2000). Rose's study also reused another sociological oral history archive based at Essex in the 1970s, 'The Edwardians', but this is marginal to his use of written sources. Our own claim that interviews can enable consideration of a relatively representative sample of attitudes about reading, is comparable to Henningsgaard's observation in his article (the last in this collection) of the potential representativeness of interviews with readers involved in publishing, which he also contrasts to Rose's use of a 'skewed' sample in *The Intellectual Life*, along with Radway's 'Smithton group'.⁴⁶

Henningsgaard's observations indicate how methodological issues span across the essays, but in arguing for some advantages of using interviews we do not want this Themed Section to put interviews on some kind of pedestal. Contributing essays consider both advantages and limitations of using interviews. For example, we note that reusing interviews from decades or even a century or two ago – whether Mayhew's or the '100 Families' collection – usually makes it difficult or impossible to ask follow-up questions. The importance of being present in the interview as a researcher is observed in Anne Heimo and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander's article (the third in the Section), where they describe the presence of material books in the interview. This article also helps to dethrone interviews insofar as they provide just one source in a rich investigation of everyday reading cultures of Finnish immigrant communities. Heimo and Salmi-Niklander use print archives as well as online publications to show how members of immigrant communities in North America and Australia have maintained a connection with Finnish culture and communities not just by reading publications from Finland but by actively producing newspapers, books, and, more recently, blogs and by engaging with social media. Along with life writings and participant observation, interviews provide just one way of exploring in further depth how individuals interact with Finnish books, as in an interview in which books themselves form a part, helping to illustrate their importance as material objects: books are 'important memorabilia'.

Collectively, these articles begin to indicate how, across very different periods and places, 'ordinary' readers do not necessarily interpret or make meaning from textual content (the focus of most theories of reading), so much as they experience books as material objects. Our own article considers how interviewees in 1980s Britain described family members using novels and newspapers as a kind of physical shield or a barrier, to demarcate a personal, protected space away from their families. For the Finns in North America and Australia with whom Heimo and Salmi-Niklander talked, books are in contrast more likely to provide a sense of connection to their families and communities – even when the books' possessors no longer understand the language. As Leah Price has discussed in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), which challenges the primacy given to the reading of texts in reader-response theories and reception histories, books can be both barriers and bridges. Price, however, acknowledges the challenges of circumventing

textuality when her investigation is based on evidence gained by her own reading, reading that is 'skewed toward the literary canon.'⁴⁷ Bypassing the assumptions and methods of a literary critic or theorist, by foregrounding interviewees' narratives in these studies we seem to be led more directly and in multiple ways to an understanding that the most important thing about a book – or newspaper or another printed form – may not always be the words inside its covers.⁴⁸ While the articles' authors are in many cases based in literature departments (King, Parmer, Towheed, Trower, Mel Gibson, Danielle Fuller) they also work across such interdisciplinary fields as book history and material culture studies. Book history has long attended to the production and distribution of books as material objects, and interviews with readers can increase understanding of their reception as such. Gibson's interviews, discussed in the fourth article of this collection, similarly bring to the forefront how readers affectively engage with and remember comics as material objects, objects that are held and rolled-up, that smell and disintegrate. Gibson shows how the use of images and comics themselves in interviews can be especially effective in eliciting reflections on reading experiences, and how they can open intergenerational dialogue in groups.

With the development of qualitative research methods in the social sciences, and corresponding moves in cultural studies and oral history theory, we have mentioned that many researchers have increasingly developed a 'bottom-up' approach to allow their participants to shape the interviews and thus the direction of their research. Radway had reflected in her 1984 study that it was through her ethnographic work with women who talked about the act of reading rather than any plot, that she learned to give up her 'obsession [as a literary scholar] with textual features and narrative details.'⁴⁹ Radway's and others' work on readers, along with Morley's and others' on audiences, still attended to the reader/viewer's role in interpreting textual meaning but also increasingly emphasised the 'extratextual *contexts* of viewing'/reading, as Lynne Pearce has commented, thereby beginning to expose a 'fantastic range of *non-interpretive* functions.'⁵⁰ Pearce herself in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997) used interviews and questionnaires to inform her exploration of what happens when 'feminist readers' are 'off-duty', developing an understanding of non-hermeneutic modes of 'implicated' reading: a metaphorical kind of romantic, interactive relationship between the reader and her text. Many of the interviews discussed in this Section again lead us to reading as an activity, to feelings about reading and the materiality of texts, rather than to interpretations of content or plot. Reusing interview archives may also help to avoid imposing disciplinary preoccupations at the stage of interviewing. In the case of the '100 Families' interviews, for example, the questions followed a schedule rather than being participant-led, but were not devised by us with any potential 'obsession' with narrative content and form. Nevertheless, interviews are unavoidably co-constructed, and we also acknowledge that the relative formality of the '100 Families' interviews likely inhibited certain responses, such as admitting to reading romances.

While all the articles here foreground what readers have said, it is Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's article (the fifth) that most prominently flags up the role of researcher-

interviewers in shaping such narratives, while it goes on to explore innovative methods for allowing participants to instead take the lead. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo reflect on how the use of interviews to investigate contemporary cultures of reading often skews findings away from negative reading experiences, due to researchers' investments in reading. Many studies, they point out, share as starting points the implicit assumption that 'reading is good for you', is pleasurable and worthwhile, whether as an individual and/or social practice. To try to minimise the positive framing and 'interestedness' of researchers, they experimented with 'Story Circles', a method of story elicitation that they argue de-centres the researchers from the process of co-constructing the narrative and interpretation. They thereby enabled discussions about negative reading experiences, including boredom, frustration, and how formative struggles with reading can persist much later in life. The first stages involve participants themselves helping to create prompts to encourage people in small groups to tell stories – in this case about reading – and then sharing stories within the larger, combined group who go on to discuss those stories. They then draw up a report with some transcriptions of the stories and discussions, for further discussion and interpretation in groups. Unlike the process of devising an interview schedule, then, the collaborative generation of story prompts and the interpretation of resulting stories and discussions is participant-centred and likely to lead in directions beyond what the researcher might have considered or even wanted. This development of a participatory approach also resembles methodological innovations in oral history and in audience research, which have increasingly involved participants not only as 'bottom-up' informers but also in the stages of analysis,⁵¹ so again we would like to point to the potential to exchange knowledge and experience about such approaches.

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo mention that the materiality of books came up in Story Circles, but their discussion leads into the materiality of their method's media: the orality of the discussions, and the written form of the reports. Story Circle participants commented on how the sound of the voice adds meaning and emotion that can be 'lost in transcription', as oral historians have also observed and as we do in our article. Jonathan Rose's article (sixth) also considers the limitations of conventional interviewing, but in this case in so far as interviews are usually conducted face-to-face and orally: he instead interviewed participants by email, in order to elicit narratives that would otherwise be inaccessible. Rose points out that oral interviews rely on the participants being able to talk for a block of time, requiring a commitment that Fuller and Rehberg Sedo point out is even more pronounced for their method as that consisted of four stages across two days, resulting in recruitment problems and 'limited access to Story Circles for those who cannot afford the time'. In order to investigate the reading of parents of autistic children, considering that many such parents do not readily have uninterrupted blocks of time, Rose argues that email interviews have advantages. Rose identified a group of parents who are even harder to access and less often heard than others: those who believe autism results from vaccination. Rose suggests that what these parents read – including scientific articles, and memoirs by celebrity autism parents – did not shape their views so much as confirm what they had already come to

believe. Again, the role of the interviewer needs consideration, and Rose argues that oral historians may do best in such circumstances to report all sides of an issue without endorsement or condemnation.⁵²

In the final article, Henningsgaard points to the benefits of interviewing publishing professionals. Much like Fuller and Rehberg-Sedo, Henningsgaard explores how interviewees can generate research questions, sometimes as a result of coming into dialogue: he cites a situation where one publisher disagreed with another's critical view of American publishers unnecessarily editing Australian books, claiming that 'Australian books are under-edited'. 'And right there', writes Henningsgaard, 'I had a brand-new research question – 'Could that be true?' – that came about in direct response to another publishing professional.' Further, by including their interviews in academic books about publishing, Henningsgaard argues that publishers are themselves far more likely to read those books and to engage further with academic research.

Interviews can problematise the idea of 'professional' as opposed to 'ordinary' readers, with which we began this introduction. Henningsgaard has observed how professional readers respond emotionally, getting excited about manuscripts in a comparable way to fans, while Heimo and Salmi-Niklander show how ordinary readers become 'active publishers' of books, newspapers and web-documents. These articles indicate how the roles of consumer and producer have become increasingly inextricable, as does work beyond our collection, including Radway's on zines.⁵³ Our own article features mainly 'ordinary' readers but also a professional reader: a literary scholar, who is described in an interview with a family member as living 'on a little planet of his own', and whose escapist reading we compare to that of romance-reading housewives. In doing so we engage with Rita Felski's call for engaging with the ordinary ways in which professional critics read.⁵⁴ Again, then, these articles illustrate how interviews can take researchers beyond their own disciplinary preoccupations and categories as professional readers, whether that is concerns with reading as textual interpretation, or the categorisation of 'ordinary' in distinction to 'professional readers'. If it was almost unheard of in the 1970s to talk to 'ordinary readers', it may now be time to consider what makes professional readers ordinary.

Since New Criticism had enabled the literary critic's reading to be professionalised, by defining the literary work 'as an object of knowledge' requiring expert interpretation, interviews with non-professional readers have led us to further query these concepts: both of reading as necessarily an act of textual interpretation and of professional critics' reading as distinct from ordinary reading.⁵⁵ To put it more positively, interviews have tended to contribute to much wider explorations of reading beyond the interpretation of meaning: such as how books can be memorabilia, the sensoriality of reading, how reading can provide an escape, can bore and excite – and to how these dimensions of reading may be experienced by readers who are also publishers, scholars and authors. As Radway has put it, authors are always readers and 'most readers do some writing in their lives.'⁵⁶ By recognising the ordinariness of our own reading we may be able to avoid positioning

ourselves as somehow outside what we analyse and describe. In her *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, Pearce describes her own implicated reading as an off-duty feminist, to try to avoid 'othering' her participants in light of all the work alerting researchers to the power-structures that attend ethnographic research.⁵⁷

This collection of essays represents a much larger growth of activity of interviewing readers. These were selected to provide the opportunity to reflect on where this method of research into readers has reached. Each essay both meets and stretches beyond the aims and constraints which the earlier stages of book history, literary and cultural studies had reached. While most of the essays identify ways to use interviews to find out more about readers whose reading was previously difficult to investigate, each also stretches beyond previous limitations and/or presents innovations in methods. To recap some examples briefly, we have explored the possibilities of reusing interviews to gather historical accounts of reading (including Mayhew's mid-nineteenth-century interviews) and to expand beyond small and skewed samples (by reusing a large and relatively representative social-historical surveys); we have also seen how the inclusion of reading materials in interviews can elicit reflections and memories beyond earlier disciplinary preoccupations with textual interpretation; and how non-conventional methods of prompting and questioning readers can elicit reflections on reading that could otherwise continue to be inaccessible. The articles represent a wide range of approaches, including both the reuse and creation of large and small interview samples, and both structured interviews and participant-led conversations. All these approaches have benefits and disadvantages; we do not endorse any single one over another. But we urge anyone who is planning to use interviews to investigate reading to consider how methods and findings are always intertwined. It is not only disciplinary assumptions about reading and readers that can be challenged, but also assumptions about the basics of interviewing, such as that they usually consist of two people talking: an interviewer asking questions and an interviewee responding. The majority of these essays discuss interviews or conversations between more than two people. Even our analysis of the quite standard survey interviews in the '100 Families' archive takes in interviews with couples whose lively interaction reveals much about reading in everyday family life, which could point the way toward the interactions between participants enabled by researchers such as Henningsgaard 30 years later. There are times when researcher-interviewers take a back seat; when readers talk to each other, sparking unanticipated insights and questions. Being readers too, by reading what others say we may even come to see our own reading in a new light.

In concluding, we also return to Robert Darnton's 1982 manifesto. In 'What is the History of Books?' he observed that the history of books had become such a 'rich' field,

that it now looks less like a field than a tropical rain forest. The explorer can hardly make his way across it. At every step he becomes entangled in a luxuriant undergrowth of journal articles, and disoriented by the crisscrossing of disciplines – analytical bibliography pointing in this direction, the sociology of

knowledge in that, while history, English, and comparative literature stake out overlapping territories.⁵⁸

What we have sought to do is to examine in depth one of the crisscrossing points: interviews about reading. The result is a greater appreciation of different methodological and interdisciplinary approaches. The essays in this collection suggest that researchers are feeling their way towards greater interdisciplinarity. We have traced a point of convergence, or entanglement, between disciplinary areas – especially book history, literary studies, cultural studies, oral history and sociology. We have wanted to set out some commonalities as well as differences between interview research into reading, as where we show how broad trends in sociological methods apply across various projects' approaches to readers. As interview methods can be used across any number of disciplines, a focus on interviews with readers can trace their comparable approaches and findings. And as readers are not necessarily situated in any discipline, their words can encourage us beyond our own into 'overlapping territories.' As Ian Collinson has put it in *Everyday Readers* (2009), 'discussions with readers raised issues that were not in any way respectful of the neat, if often arbitrary, academic boundaries within which research is executed: the interviewees pushed the research into unfamiliar territory.'⁵⁹

Reading studies like book history must be 'interdisciplinary in method', as Darnton put it, pointing out that books 'refuse to be contained within the confines of a single discipline when treated as objects of study.'⁶⁰ When treated as subjects of study, readers can also show us ways across the communications circuit. Books are written, published, distributed and read; readers write, publish and get read.

We have also set out some pointers to how such methods are developed more broadly across audience studies. We hope this collection might mark a moment when we can increasingly integrate such approaches, exchanging knowledge and experience across disciplinary borders. However, it may also be that interviewing as a method is not easily adaptable or equally amenable to all disciplinary concerns, such as for eliciting interpretations of narratives. In this case researchers may need to work on ways of encouraging readers to engage with textual content in interviews – for example by asking people to reread particular books, and discussing passages as part of the interview, as Alison Waller has done in literary studies.⁶¹ In other words, in order to develop and apply the expertise of a discipline such as literary studies to the study of reading, it may be necessary to further explore and adapt methods of interviewing.

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Notes:

¹ Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', *Daedalus* 111: 3 (1982): 65-83 (p.66).

² Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), chapter 9.

³ See Iser, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1980).

⁴ Darnton, 'What is the History', 78-79.

⁵ Darnton, 'What is the History', 80.

⁶ Rose, 'Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to the History of Audiences', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992), 47-70.

⁷ Rose, 'Rereading', 49.

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- ⁸ Pawley, 'Seeking "Significance": Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities', *Book History* 5 (2002), 143-160 (p.143).
- ⁹ Noted by Darnton, 'What is the History', 11; Rose, 'Rereading', 50; Pawley, 'Seeking "Significance"', 144ff.
- ¹⁰ Pawley, 'Seeking "Significance"', 145, 151.
- ¹¹ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), p.222. It is cited for example in Stephen Colclough, 'Readers: Books and Biography', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, eds. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp.50-62 (51).
- ¹² Colclough, 'Readers: Books and Biography', p.53.
- ¹³ Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), p.4.
- ¹⁴ Martyn Lyons, *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p.6.
- ¹⁵ Lyons, *Reading Culture*, p.7.
- ¹⁶ Lyons, *Reading Culture*, p.112.
- ¹⁷ Lyons, *Reading Culture*, p.9.
- ¹⁸ Lyons, *Reading Culture*, p.10.
- ¹⁹ Rose made use mostly of life writing but also of an oral history collection, *The Edwardians*, for his *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2001), as we discuss in our article in this Themed Section.
- ²⁰ Rose's 'Rereading' refers to how 'Only one in ten' memoirs was written by women (51).
- ²¹ Another more recent example is Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp.40-41. For the turn in the 1980s to ethnography in literary studies as part of a broader turn in cultural studies and audience research, see Ian Collinson, *Everyday Readers: Reading and Popular Culture* (London: Equinox, 2009).
- ²² Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.8.
- ²³ Rose, 'Rereading', 70.
- ²⁴ Machor and Goldstein, *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.205.
- ²⁵ Machor and Goldstein, *Reception Study*, p.205.
- ²⁶ Batsleer et al, *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp.140-141.
- ²⁷ Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: 'Gone With the Wind' and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989).
- ²⁸ See Simon Eliot, 'The Reading Experience Database; or, what are we to do about the history of reading?', www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm (accessed 23 March 2019).
- ²⁹ For more information about these projects see 'Scottish Readers Remember' <http://sapphire.ac.uk/scottish-readers-remember-ahrc-funded/>; Reading Sheffield at <https://www.readingsheffield.co.uk/about/>; and Memories of Fiction: An Oral History at www.memoriesoffiction.org (accessed 23 March 2019).
- ³⁰ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne E. F. McKechnie, and Paulette M. Rothbauer give an excellent overview of research into reading across all these and other fields, much of which involves interviews among other methods of engaging with readers, in *Reading Matters: What the Research*

Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community (Westport, Connecticut and London: Libraries Unlimited, 2006) and *Reading Still Matters* (Libraries Unlimited, 2018).

³¹ Rosenthal, *Speaking of Reading* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), pp. xvi-xviii.

³² Mayhew described street scenes in which the Sunday papers and stories in periodicals are read aloud for example, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp.25-27. Shafquat Towheed discusses Mayhew's interviews in the first article in this Themed Section which we introduce below.

³³ Rebecca Roach discusses how 'the adoption of research interviewing helped sociology in particular to define itself as a discipline', while sociology promoted the interview as a methodology, in *Literature and the Rise of the Interview* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), p.109-112. See also Jennifer Platt, 'The History of the Interview', in *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage, 2001), 33-54; Jennifer Platt, *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

³⁴ Credited for doing this by Stephen Karetzky, in *Reading Research and Librarianship: A History and Analysis* (Westport: Greenwood, 1982), p.95. Douglas Waples and Ralph W. Tyler, *What People Want to Read about: A Study of Group Interests and a Survey of Problems in Adult Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931). See also Douglas Waples, Bernard Berelson, Franklyn R. Bradshaw, *What Reading Does to People: A Summary of Evidence on the Social Effects of Reading and a Statement of Problems for Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940) for more use of interviews (the final chapters describes some use of methods including interviews, pp.215-6). Waples's works stressed the quantitative although also had some qualitative elements, for example see *Investigating Library Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

³⁵ Discussed by Karetzky, *Reading Research*, p.152.

³⁶ Ruth Strang, *Explorations in Reading Patterns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p.116 ('further testing'), p.135 (questions), p.7 (the final quotation).

³⁷ See, for example, Platt, 'The History of the Interview', p.23, and Raymond Lee, 'Recording Technologies and the Interview in Sociology, 1920-2000', *Sociology* 38: 5 (2004), 869-89 (p.879).

³⁸ Wendy Simonds, *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1992), p.9.

³⁹ Simonds, *Women*, p.13. Platt's 'The History of the Interview' also discusses this shift for feminists to interviews that allowed interviewees to talk 'in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (p.26).

⁴⁰ Kuhn, Bultereyst and Meers, 'Memories of cinemagoing and film experience: An introduction', in *Memory Studies* 10: 1 (2017), 6.

⁴¹ Alexander Freund, 'Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age', *Oral History Review* 42: 1 (2015), 96-132.

⁴² Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.5.

⁴³ Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, p.15.

⁴⁴ For examples of quantitative and mixed methods in other fields, including book industry studies, see for example *Reading Still Matters*, p.140-7. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo have also used mixed methods in *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), as has Ian Collinson, *Everyday Readers: Reading and Popular Culture* (Equinox, 2009).

⁴⁵ For mixed methods in audience studies see Geoffroy Patriache, Helena Bilandzic, Jakob Linnaa Jensen and Jelena Jurišić, *Audience Research Methodologies: Between Innovation and Consolidation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p.5.

⁴⁶ We discuss Radway's 'Smithton' group, from *Reading the Romance*, further in our essay. Issues of representativeness have continued in Radway's more recent work on zines, where she had been interviewing 'young women who were/are privileged in certain ways... There were working-class zinesters... How would I access them?' Radway, 'Interview with Janice Radway', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10: 1, (2013), 154-176 (pp.171-172).

⁴⁷ Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2012), Kindle edn. (Chapter 1: Reader's Block.)

⁴⁸ We want to credit Sarah Pyke, the PhD researcher funded by the AHRC project, 'Memories of Fiction' (see acknowledgements), as a key source for this insight that oral history interviews can take us beyond the textual.

⁴⁹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.87.

⁵⁰ Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (New York: Hodder, 1997), 14-15; David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Routledge, 1986). See also Ian Collinson's discussion of the 'textualist orthodoxy' in *Everyday Readers*, especially pp.11-14. Sociologist Elizabeth Long makes similar points in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*: 'Originally, I had thought of book groups as places where I might have access to members' individual interpretations of books'; Long's ethnographic research led her to encounter conversations which 'move back and forth between using people's remarks as windows into the text (the primary imperative of literary analysis) and using the text as a window into people's lives or various aspects of the cultural and social lives we live together' (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2003), p.144, 145. For a very different take on the materiality and non-linguistic sense of literature, see Shelley Trower, 'Vibrations', in *Literature and Sound*, ed. Anna Snaith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, forthcoming 2020).

⁵¹ For oral history, Michael Frisch's concept of 'shared authority', elaborated in *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, has been very influential (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990). Participatory approaches in audience studies are discussed for example in Patriache *et al*, *Audience Research Methodologies*, pp.6-7.

⁵² This is a position which we would not endorse in all such controversial situations, however, in cases where controversy is manufactured by misinformation and one "side" is factually incorrect – an example being the British Broadcasting Corporation's overdue shift away from including climate change deniers to balance "debates" when scientists had long reached consensus regarding the overwhelming reality of human-made global warming, e.g. see www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-40899188 and www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/07/bbc-we-get-climate-change-coverage-wrong-too-often (accessed 28 March 2019). As Kathleen Blee has argued in another context, discussing her interviews with members of the Klu Klux Klan, to interview can be to empower; there can be a tension between our responsibilities to interviewees, and to society and history: 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan', in *The Oral History Reader* 2nd edn., ed. Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 322-331.

⁵³ Janice Radway, 'Zines Then and Now. What Are They? What Do You Do With Them? How Do They Work?', in *From Codex To Hypertext*, ed. Anouk Lang (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts

Press), pp.27-47. Lang also discusses this confrontation with ‘the artificiality of the historical divide between scholarly work on social processes around the *consumption* of texts and research that deals with textual *production*’, in the Introduction (see p.2 & 17).

⁵⁴ See also Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*.

⁵⁵ As Jane P. Tompkins argued in *Reader-Response Criticism*, reader-response criticism was initially no radical shift: the interpretation of meaning was still the aim, whether meaning was found in the text or the reader (‘The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response’, in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), pp.201-32).

⁵⁶ Radway, ‘Interview with Janice Radway’, 171.

⁵⁷ Pearce, *Feminism*, pp.190-191.

⁵⁸ Darnton, ‘What is the History’, 66.

⁵⁹ Collinson, *Everyday Readers*, p.15.

⁶⁰ Darnton, ‘What is the History’, 81.

⁶¹ Alison Waller, ‘Rereading and Memory Work: A New Phenomenological Methodology in Children’s Literature Studies’, in C. Beauvais and M. Nikolajeva (eds.), *Companion to Children’s Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017), pp.136-149; Alison Waller, *Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).