

‘Me mum likes a book, me dad’s a newspaper man’: Reading, gender and domestic life in ‘100 Families’

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Abstract:

Many of the interviewees for the oral history project ‘100 Families’, carried out in Britain in the 1980s, described reading as part of family life. This archive supports Janice Radway’s findings in *Reading the Romance* (first published in 1984) that women read for escape and as a form of resistance to domestic roles, but it also shows that such findings may be applied more broadly than romance to other kinds of readers and reading material, from the novel-reading wife and the newspaper-reading father to the Joyce-scholar husband. Whereas Radway approached romance-reading women, this article develops a new kind of methodological approach with its reuse of an oral history archive, incorporating both female and male readers, and their children, spouses, and siblings. The reuse of interviews for different purposes than originally intended can avoid the imposition of disciplinary categories on data from the outset. In this case the ‘100 Families’ sample allows us to step back from any particular literary genre or reader, to draw comparisons between how different family members engage with different kinds of texts. The article questions the dichotomy between women’s and men’s reading activities, considering how the interviews describe the non-fiction reading father/husband as a solitary, absorbed figure, who in carving out time away from domestic life is comparable to the romance reader.

Key words: Oral history interviews, reuse, reading, gender, family, methodology

Introduction

The oral history project 'Families, Social Mobility and Ageing: A Multigenerational Approach (100 Families)' was led by Paul Thompson and Howard Newby in the sociology department at the University of Essex (UK) from 1985 to 1988. It consisted of 213 interviews spread across three generations, located in 35 parliamentary constituencies across Scotland, England and Wales. Interviewers used a semi-structured schedule to cover a broad range of economic, social, and cultural topics, from work and leisure activities to religion, health, child-rearing, politics and class.¹ Despite the wide-ranging nature of the questions, the central focus was consistently family life: the daily, the domestic, the routine. The project's aim was to record multiple generations of family members discussing many aspects of family life. Within this broad spectrum interviewers asked questions specifically relating to reading. They asked interviewees if they themselves read, if other family members read, whether there were books in the house they grew up in as well as their current home, and whether they attended a library in the past or the present. Analysis of the archive's transcriptions thus gives insight into the part that reading has played within family life, and it reveals reading to be narrated as a distinctly gendered activity.

Other approaches can find alternative routes through the archive, as in the case of Rosemary Eliot's study of the changing role of smoking in peoples' lives across the twentieth century.² Even the specific area of reading could yield multiple aspects for further analysis, such as the use of libraries, or practices of reading to children, across generations, classes and genders. By identifying all the discussions of books and reading in the interviews, and coding these according to types and themes using NVivo (qualitative data analysis software), it became apparent that certain topics recurred and could form a basis for further analysis and discussion. Reading as a gendered activity was prominent across the '100 Families' interviews.³ Types of reading material, reasons for reading, the importance attributed to reading and value judgements therein, all contribute to a picture of reading within family life as something that often took place along gendered lines.

Some of the most gendered accounts of reading apply to the family roles of mothers and fathers. Participants talked at length about their parents, and where applicable their own roles as mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. Broadly, in terms of reading habits this plays out in a conventional tendency across generations to name mothers as readers of fiction, and fathers as readers of newspapers and other forms of non-fiction. Further, mothers' reading is often portrayed as being escapist, broad and indiscriminate, whereas fathers' reading is more commonly depicted as directed, often with a functional basis, rather than being solely a leisure activity.

The '100 Families' archive provides a historical source that allows us in this essay to test and add nuance to Janice Radway's findings in *Reading the Romance* (1984). Radway's study was published slightly earlier in the same decade, and its empirical account of actual,

as opposed to ‘inscribed, ideal, or model’ readers, marks a turning point in feminist studies of romance, and in book studies more generally (as discussed in the Introduction to this Themed Section).⁴ Radway took an ethnographic approach, carrying out group discussions, interviews and questionnaires with a focus group of prolific romance readers in a Midwestern US community (given the fictional name of ‘Smithton’). In the UK, Janet Batsleer *et al* conducted their comparable, although much smaller study, ‘Some women reading’ (1985), involving interviews with young women at school and women looking after children at home.⁵ Helen Taylor’s *Scarlett’s Women* (1989) invited fans of *Gone With the Wind* to write to her and to complete questionnaires about their experiences and memories of the book and film.⁶ Such studies became quite typical as a new generation of researchers began to seek out the experiences of and evidence left by actual readers, a trend that has continued through studies of reading deploying qualitative methods, along with the development of resources such as the Reading Experience Database (launched in 1996) and oral history projects pioneered by Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taska’s *Australian Readers Remember* (1992).⁷

Radway’s approach led her to think about reading not only as interpretation of books’ contents but also as an activity. The women explained their reading as ‘a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers.’⁸ Where previous studies had tended to denigrate romance readers as passive, escapist victims, Radway’s contributed to an emerging strand in feminist studies in the 1980s which began to reconsider both the romance and its readers.⁹ For the women in Radway’s study, the activity of romance reading provided a form of ‘individual resistance’ to their roles in the patriarchal family, books being used ‘to erect a barrier between themselves and their families in order to declare themselves temporarily off-limits to those who would mine them for emotional support and material care.’¹⁰ The act of reading enabled the women to buy some time for themselves, away from their ‘self-negating social roles’, while the content of the romances paradoxically tended to endorse these roles. In the ‘100 Families’ interviews, participants similarly described women’s reading and domestic work as opposed activities, supporting the argument that romance reading can allow temporary escape from conventional gender roles. The ‘100 Families’ archive also allows us to extend our analysis beyond women readers themselves to descriptions from other family members both of women and men reading. It provides a different kind of empirical source to Radway’s and to the other projects mentioned above, as its focus was not primarily on reading but on families.

Whereas Radway approached romance-reading women, ‘100 Families’ interviewees include both female and male readers, and also their children, spouses, and siblings. In this essay we are thus able to incorporate women readers as part of a wider familial context, being presented with descriptions of reading not only from the readers themselves but from other family members, some of whom also expressed disapproval of their mother’s, wife’s, or sister’s reading activity (usually, but not always that of a female family member). Radway’s sense of women’s reading as a potentially radical act in the domestic sphere

seems to become eclipsed in the '100 Families' interviews in favour of traditional attitudes toward women's reading, as interviewees tended to disparage women's reading habits and material as distinct from men's "heavier", non-fictional or purposeful reading. We will go on to query the dichotomy between women's and men's reading habits, and to draw connections between multiple forms of reading material (especially novels and newspapers), proposing that men similarly engaged in escapist reading in using it to erect a barrier between themselves and their families.

Radway's recruitment process employed informal personal networks through a local bookstore in an American midwestern town. She points out that her study's propositions, based on this small group of romance readers, should not be incautiously extrapolated from and simply applied to other romance readers. (To give a sense of numbers, Radway conducted group discussions with sixteen readers during her first visit to 'Smithton' and went on to interview five of those individually; those sixteen readers plus another twenty five filled out a questionnaire, followed by a second questionnaire completed by 117 readers.¹¹) Rather, they should be considered 'hypotheses' to be further tested by 'looking at a much broader and unrelated group of romance readers.'¹² Batsleer *et al*'s study is even more focused with an even smaller number of participants (using nineteen single interviews in total, twelve with women looking after children at home) to make some 'provisional' remarks in a short chapter, which nevertheless indicates how comparable studies with real readers were beginning to emerge in the period. Batsleer *et al* remark how, for women who work at home, there are no clear boundaries between work and leisure. In this situation, reading is a flexible way of creating time, of 'set[ting] her own boundaries'.¹³

Lyons and Taksa's study points the way to how oral history projects can open up a wider social base: they interviewed 61 people, again focusing on readers but gathering some information about family life and seeking out some diversity 'in order to contrast the different experiences of readers separated by barriers of class or gender' (other factors included religion and birthplace).¹⁴ They acknowledge that their study nevertheless had a preponderance of urban, middle-class and female interviewees. Their work can provide further support among an unrelated group of readers for gendered differences in reading material: they find that novels were 'considered an archetypal part of the female domain', while newspapers 'fell mainly within the jurisdiction of the male' although women and men would both read certain sections.¹⁵ They also observe a general opposition between reading and housework, although these findings are somewhat contradictory: interviewees commonly asserted that women had not had time for reading as they were too busy carrying out domestic duties. Being a reader and a good housekeeper were 'seen as incompatible'.¹⁶ On further questioning, however, many women went on to list books and periodicals they enjoyed, and Lyons and Taksa adopt Anne-Marie Thiesse's description (from an earlier study, in which she interviewed French women about their reading habits) of how such reading took place during moments of respite as a 'stolen or furtive pleasure'.¹⁷

The interviewee sample for '100 Families' is yet larger in number and broader in scope. It provides a cross-section of different kinds of participants from a range of

geographic regions, ages, and class backgrounds – its 213 interviews fulfilling an occupational quota to ensure a class balance – and it does not have any specific focus on readers. In contrast, then, to studies such as Radway's, in which the reader participants tend to be middle-class married women¹⁸, we hear in '100 Families' from working-class as well as middle-class participants, from single as well as married women and men, from couples in dialogue as well as individually, from those who read prolifically and who do not read at all (basic information about each interviewee is provided for quotations below). The sample is still limited and specific, providing a British-based snapshot from the 1980s - albeit incorporating memories of earlier generations, of parents' reading - with a relatively small proportion of the interviews saying anything substantial about romance reading.¹⁹ Nevertheless, this sample does provide examples of reading that resemble Radway's (and Batsleer *et al*'s very preliminary) findings, helping to support the likelihood that these can be extrapolated beyond her group of romance readers, as well as allowing us to extend our analysis to observations of the dynamics of reading in family spaces and of men's reading activities.

In a later essay, 'What's the Matter with Reception Study?' (2008), Radway considers how *Reading the Romance*, like many other studies of reading, sets out with a literary category: in this case the romance genre, a genre 'that is specifically about gender relations'. Analysis is thus restricted to a specific group of subjects, who are reified as 'romance readers', and 'saturated by their gender'.²⁰ Helen Taylor's *Scarlett's Women* provides an even more specific example in its focus on readers of a single text, *Gone With the Wind*, who frequently identify with Scarlett. In these cases as in others, the researchers start out with the literary texts, then selecting readers of those texts, while another approach is to start out with particular reading publics, such as Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader*, Lyons and Taksa's *Australian Readers*, or Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.²¹ Our sample in contrast allows us to step back from any particular kind of reader, or literary text or genre, to draw comparisons between how different family members engage with different kinds of texts, including romance and detective novels but also newspapers, biographies and literary criticism. It is beyond the scope of this present article, but as the sample is not even constrained to reading, comparisons could be made not only between different kinds of printed media but also between reading and television viewing, cinema and theatre going. Rather than being defined primarily as readers, participants in this study are situated as family members whose reading forms part of – or operates in opposition to – domestic life.

For a further point on method, it may be worth considering how oral history interviews can help to break away from the focus on written texts, both as the object of study (as in the case of the romance) and the means of investigation (as where Flint looks at conduct books and novels along with paintings for representations of women reading, for example). Rose's *The Intellectual Life* is the one other study of reading we know of that has reused an oral history collection, 'Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918 (The Edwardians)', recorded in the early 1970s, and also led by Paul Thompson (along with Trevor

Lummis and Thea Thompson) at the University of Essex.²² The chapter that uses oral history is for the most part concerned with experiences of school, using oral history to provide support for his claim that working-class experiences of school - including reading at school - were more positive than other studies had previously shown. This quite specific angle feeds into the much more general study of an autodidact tradition of reading for self-improvement, as evidenced for the most part in unpublished and self-published autobiographical writing. In other words, in Rose's study the oral histories are very much secondary to his primary analysis of written texts, especially working-class life writing by self-professed readers. As Stefan Collini observes, 'his attempts to arrive at large historical generalizations run aground on the awkward, indeed insuperable, difficulty that the working-class autobiographers upon whose testimony he so largely relies were, by the very fact of their writings, exceptional.'²³ Or as Leah Price puts it, 'Not only are autobiographers by definition highly literate, but the dominance of rags-to-riches stories [...] makes it hard for the adult narrator not to read his middle-class milieu backward into the experiences of the working-class youth described.'²⁴ Those who are in a position to write an autobiographical narrative are invested in written texts; they are likely to value what they have read as crucial to their development. The '100 Families' interviews allow us to access narratives not just from working-class interviewees but also from those who define themselves or others as non-readers.

A drawback with reusing older archives, however, is that the audio recordings are often hard to access in contrast to current projects on which researchers are engaging directly with the oral interviews themselves, as interviewers (in many cases) and as active members of a team who can readily exchange the born-digital audio files and who often make at least some available online; as in the case of the Reading Sheffield and Memories of Fiction projects.²⁵ The British Library has copies of many of the audio files for '100 Families' in their original reel-to-reel tape format, but very few are currently digitised. We worked from the transcripts that are readily available online, the limitations of which have been long discussed by oral historians.²⁶ It may thus be that nuances of meaning are lost, as in the first interview extract below, for example, where it is hard to determine what kind of laughter is signified by '{laughs}'. Further, we cannot go back these 30 years later to ask follow-up questions (not least because many of the interviewees are now dead), to establish for example whether a 'good book' could have included a romance.

Time out: women absorbed in 'light' fiction

The following two extracts from '100 Families' come from women readers themselves, both mothers with working-class backgrounds, one married and one single. These extracts stand out for their similar accounts of the interviewees' own reading as an activity that takes place before carrying out domestic work:

Mrs Roy (d.o.b. 1911, elementary occupations, West Midlands, married):

I've gotta good book and I like to sit and read it, see, and then I p'raps do me work! {Laughs} I know when they were small, I mean, I didn't have a lotta spare time, but if I'd gotta good book and they'd all gone to school 'n' that, I'd sit and read that book and then I'd work like mad to get it done! {Laughs}

'Stalybridge parent' (d.o.b. missing, elementary occupations, North West, single): She [mother] was a great reader for a start, 'cos I can remember.....a lot of things that I remember from when I was small involved saying mum, mum, can we do this. And she'd say when I've finished this chapter. And I found myself doing it to my own kids later on. [...]

I was quite happy being at home all day with the kids. That never bothered me, I liked it. If nothing else I could always sit down and read a book when nobody was looking. Spend all day reading a book and then rush about at the last minute, pretend I'd been busy all day.

We cannot hear the sound of Mrs Roy's laughter, which could perhaps have been loud, rebellious laughter or quieter, slightly nervous laughter, provoked by a guilty feeling that she was expected to spend her time working. But we can at least see in these transcripts how both interviewees describe themselves as mothers who at times prioritised reading over domestic work, which they carried out afterwards. Housework was done in haste. Mrs Roy worked 'like mad to get it done'; Stalybridge parent would 'rush about at the last minute', contributing to the sense of reading as a leisurely activity. Stalybridge parent explicitly describes how she engaged in a deception, reading 'when nobody was looking' and pretending to have been busy all day, to perhaps guiltily conceal her reading activity from others. These interview extracts also span from the past to the present, showing continuity in the reading habits. Decades after having children, Mrs Roy in the 1980s continues to do her work after reading, if at all ('and then I p'raps do me work'). 'Stalybridge parent' compares her reading activity as a mother to how her own mother would read before doing things with her as a child ('when I've finished this chapter').

These extracts, then, seem to illustrate Radway's observations that women explain their reading as 'a way of temporarily refusing the demands' of their domestic roles, indicating that such reading activity applies beyond her own specific sample from a US midwestern town in the 1980s to a wider range of generations, classes, and geographical areas. The emphasis on the family in the '100 Families' interviews also encourages a broader focus beyond the interviewee's own reading, which seems to lead 'Stalybridge parent' to make connections between hers and her mother's reading habits. In addition, whereas Radway's interviews were exclusively with women readers themselves, the '100 Families' interviews provide generational perspectives of women reading, as in the following description from Mrs Schlarman of her mother (like 'Stalybridge parent's mother) reading before carrying out her domestic role, in this case delaying the preparation of food. Mrs Schlarman was amongst those interviewees who situate their mothers' reading in a wider

family context, introducing an opposition between her father's reading of newspapers and her mother's reading of novels, an opposition to which we later return:

Mrs Schlarman (d.o.b. 1946, professional, North West, married):

Interviewer: You were saying your father enjoyed reading?

Interviewee: Well, I'll qualify that a bit, he did seem to, but he never seemed to read books, I didn't, you know, novels or anything, he didn't read those, but he did read the newspaper and things, and my mother read books, and she used to get lost in a book, I remember as a child, 'When are you going to get my tea?', as she was reading a book, she read a lot, yes.

Interviewer: What sort of things?

Interviewee: Well, novels, not romantic fiction, but not, she's got a bit heavier as the years have gone on, but yes, she's always read quite a lot.

It is hard to discern whether Mrs Roy, 'Stalybridge parent' or her mother, or Mrs Schlarman's mother, read romance novels, as is the case for all of Radway's readers. Whereas Radway's participants defend their romance reading against those who participate in the larger cultural condemnation of this 'leisure pursuit' as 'frivolous and vaguely, if not explicitly, pornographic',²⁷ the '100 Families' interviewees seem more inclined to avoid admitting that they read romances. None of these interviewees state that this is what they or their mothers read, and indeed Mrs Schlarman denies it. On the one hand we might speculate that women's activity of reading to temporarily resist performing their domestic roles is not restricted to romance, but includes a more general category of novels. On the other, Mrs Schlarman's hesitant suggestion that her mother read "light", but 'not romantic fiction', could suggest that the stereotype is so strong and demeaning for some by the mid-1980s as to need defending against, regardless of whether she actually read such novels. The women readers themselves also seem to have internalised the sense that their own reading is illegitimate, as where Stalybridge parent conceals her reading activity. Although she now reveals this deception, neither she nor Mrs Roy specify what kind of books or genres they read.

The relative formality of the '100 Families' interviews, in contrast to Radway's use of informal personal networks to approach readers, could help to explain why interviewees seem more reluctant to admit that they or their family read romances. Radway's main initial contact, the romance-reading bookseller 'Dot', announced 'Jan is just people!' on introducing (Janice) Radway to her customers, and they were all fully aware that she wanted to talk about their romance reading.²⁸ The interview context for '100 Families' did not create the same expectations, and indeed some interviewees may have felt that admitting to such frivolous reading as romance fiction implies was inappropriate, especially considering that interviewees were told that one of the project's main themes was family and social mobility.²⁹ The cultural trope of women reading romantic fiction seems pervasive and demeaning enough that some '100 Families' interviewees may have felt the need to

distance themselves or their relatives from a genre not usually well regarded. Margaret Beckwith, for example, admits to reading romances but not to liking them: 'Well, I have me spells. When I read. I mean romances just now. But – I've read all Alistair Maclean's, Hammond Innes, Duncan Kyle. I like men's books really' (d.o.b. 1942, admin/secretarial, North East, married). These 'spells' of reading might even hint at a kind of hysteria, a period of unreason, which the 'men's books' help to abate. As Rita Felski puts it, 'the novel is the genre most frequently accused of casting a spell on its readers; like a dangerous drug, it lures them away from their everyday lives.'³⁰ In contrast, Margaret's husband reads 'just the paper', much as Mrs Schlarman reported that her father read the newspaper, 'never... novels'. These extracts are illustrative of the many interviews containing accounts of wives reading lots of novels, while husbands are said to read only newspapers, or to read very little or not at all.

There is of course a well-established history of men's books being regarded as more respectable than women's, which can be traced through the historical deprecation of 'romance' from a worthy masculine genre to a trashy, lowbrow form read (and written) largely by women, beginning in the seventeenth century but most visible from the later nineteenth.³¹ As Batsleer *et al* observe, both male and female authors working in 'masculine' genres, such as the thriller (Maclean, Innes and Kyle fit here) or detective story (Agatha Christie is the leading example), 'fall within the ambit of "literature", whose doors remain firmly closed to their "romantic" sisters.'³² Interviewees for '100 Families' in the mid-1980s thus seem readier to admit to reading (or liking), or to their family members reading such generic authors rather than romances. Roy Barrow similarly defines his wife's reading interests by negation, by the romance fiction that is not (usually) read, and goes on to say that he reads much less than her:

Barrow (d.o.b. 1936, associate professional and technical, North West, married):
Marjory does a heck of a lotta reading. Mainly detective novels. Or it used to be mainly detective novels – Agatha Christie type of, not a lotta love stories to my knowledge. She does a lot more reading than I do.

Although Roy first claims that his wife reads 'Mainly detective novels', he then seems less certain, adding 'Or it used to be mainly detective novels... not a lotta love stories to my knowledge.' Again, it is hard to be sure here whether Marjory does in fact read lots of romances, or whether she is more likely to avoid mentioning when she is reading a romance and to feel happier leaving a detective novel lying about.

A comparable contrast between the wife reading a lot and the husband little or none emerges in the following interview with a married couple. The wife in this case reports that her husband will 'never sit down with a book... never', while she reads 'Most things'. But whereas Roy Barrow goes some way to defend his wife's reading against any potential assumption that she might read lots of love stories, Arthur Winn seems to mock his wife's reading material:

Arthur Winn and his wife (classified under Arthur: d.o.b. 1942, technical occupations, North West)

Wife: [...] I like reading. Arthur can't – he'll never sit down with a book, do you – never.

Interviewer: What sort of things do you like reading?

Wife: I don't mind. Most things.

Husband: *Scandal!*

Wife: Stories rather than – it just depends. I'm quite interested in most things. I can sit and read and switch off and not hear anything that's going on around me.

Husband: Oh – that's very true.

The concept of women being absorbed in fiction – which we also saw in Mrs Schlarman's account of how her mother 'used to get lost in a book' – also has deep historical roots. Rather than engaging with the public world of newspaper facts, which Lyons has observed 'were usually a male preserve' in the nineteenth century, women's novel reading has often been considered frivolous and escapist, interfering with domestic duties.³³ As Flint has discussed in *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, such female absorption in reading material became a subject of concern, coming under scrutiny in medical texts, newspaper articles and advice manuals for example, not least because it implied 'the subject's vulnerability to textual influence, deaf and blind to all other stimuli in her immediate environment'.³⁴ Mrs Winn's claim that when reading she can 'switch off and not hear anything that's going on around me' is strongly reminiscent of Flint's account here of nineteenth-century concerns about women readers. For Karin Littau, such ideas of reading fiction as a dangerously absorbing activity, and also as one which 'squandered time' that could otherwise be used for housework, 'continues well into the nineteenth century, only to be superseded at the beginning of the twentieth century by similar attitudes voiced about early, and especially female, cinema spectators' and later television viewing.³⁵ Interviewees for '100 Families', as well as for Radway's study, indicate how opposition between the time-consuming activities of housework and escapist reading continued well into the second half of the twentieth century, and it is an opposition tied up with value judgements of women's reading material.

Arthur Winn in his exchange with his wife disparages her reading material: when asked about her reading he cuts across her answer, summing up her preference as '*Scandal!*' This serves to mock the wife's reading as frivolous, and the literary equivalent of gossiping; a morally questionable activity culturally associated with negative forms of femaleness.³⁶ Mrs Winn, meanwhile, describes her reading as prolific, much as Mrs Schlarman's mother 'read a lot' or Marjory Barrow 'does a heck of a lotta reading', heightening the contrast between hers and her husband's non-reading. Finally, she gives a character to her reading: she says that when she reads she 'switch[es] off' from her physical environment, being totally absorbed in what she is reading. In her husband's response there is again the implication of mockery or gentle chiding of her escapist behaviour. Mr Winn seems to feel that his wife is completely inaccessible to him when reading, agreeing heartily

with her claim that she switches off and doesn't hear anything. The husband, left in the real world while his wife is transported, also echoes the husbands of Radway's romance readers, many of whom expressed annoyance and even resentment at being 'shut out' through their wives' reading. Several of Radway's interviewees surmised that their husbands were threatened or made jealous by anything that could absorb their wife so fully, offering them emotional satisfaction and drawing 'the women's attention away from the immediate family circle'.³⁷

So far, then, we have heard from daughters and husbands as well as from the women who have themselves spent time reading before resuming their domestic role. From Mrs Schlarman's and from Mr Winn's perspective, their female family member (mother and wife respectively), seems to become 'lost' or transported in fiction that they present as 'light' or frivolous, if not outright romantic. Fathers and husbands are said to read far fewer if any books. Instead their wives, children and other family members frequently describe them as reading newspapers, reading which escapes disparagement.

The interviews often present the family context of reading with few if any clues as to what was being read beyond the general medium. Novels and newspapers were most frequently mentioned, followed by magazines and the Bible.³⁸ As the '100 Families' interviews were not conducted by literary scholars with any specific text, author or genre in mind, they did not push this agenda and it is striking that interviewees did not tend to spontaneously offer information about textual content except for the most part in occasional broad and brief references to rejected or favoured genres or generic authors, such as romantic fiction, 'men's books', 'Agatha Christie type of' detective novels. At least as noteworthy in these interviews as the content of reported reading, is how reading is recalled as an activity that forms part of family life. We are presented with an image of the mother and wife at a distance from her family, absorbed as she is in her books, whatever they may be.

Our next section will look further at the more occasional specific references to authors, focusing on two of the most frequently mentioned, Catherine Cookson and Barbara Cartland. In doing so, we will try to take on board some of the more precise, individual and less typical family practices of reading, and attitudes to specific romance authors, situated in mid-1980s Britain, alongside our more general claims about gendered reading.

Reading Cookson and Cartland

Mothers and fathers, husbands and wives in '100 Families' are generally depicted through a gendered dichotomy of reading, although there are examples that break with convention. In the following excerpt, a married couple discuss reading as an activity they both enjoy, and which is incorporated into their shared leisure time:

Emily and Walter Norton (d.o.b. 1921, elementary occupations, North West)

Interviewer: Do you like reading?

Wife: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: What do you like reading?

Husband: I'm reading Catherine Cookson.

Wife: We went away, didn't we, and I take loads of books, I pack them all around the suitcases, and when it's too hot to go out we lay on the bed and we have the water boiler so we can have a cuppa tea or coffee, or whatever, whatever we want, whenever we want, when the sun's at its height, the zenith, as they call it, and we lay on the bed, don't we, and have a read, and he'd read all his books up, so anyway he hasn't finished reading Catherine Cookson. Mostly I get Agatha Christies, and we both don't mind them, but he's finishing that off now.

While men are overwhelmingly associated with non-fiction in '100 Families' interviews as we illustrated above, this excerpt is notable for its depiction of a male reader of fiction, and also for its account of shared reading and the choices made in a marital context. It is the husband in this interview who first replies to the question of what they like to read, naming the author of the novels he is currently reading. His wife then steps in to explain the background for his reading of Cookson's novels: Emily is in charge of packing the books for their holiday, and Walter reads her choices once he has finished his own books. Cookson's novels are therefore her choice, along with Christie's, both of which Walter readily reads and enjoys, laid in bed together with his wife. So while the reading material seems to be driven by the wife's selections, the repetition of 'we', peppered throughout the vignette, has the effect of presenting the couple as a unit, and their experience as a shared one. Reading features strongly in how this couple choose to spend that most precious guarded of leisure periods together: the holiday abroad.

Christie's novels are mentioned twice across the interviews. The interview with Roy Barrow (excerpted in the section above) indicates how his wife's reading of Christie's detective type of novels are distinguished from that lowest of genres, the romance, which may help explain why Emily in this interview reports that she 'Mostly' gets Christie's novels 'and we both don't mind them'. There are other male fiction-readers in addition to this interviewee, but they are somewhat scarce and it is worth noting that this is the only occasion in the interviews in which a male reader is associated with either Christie or Cookson, despite several female readers referring to the latter.

That Cookson appears as a named author in several interviews, although the naming of specific authors was generally uncommon across the interview set, makes sense given her huge popularity at the time of the '100 Families' interviews.³⁹ Mary Lear names Cookson as an author for whom she will make an exception:

Mary Lear (d.o.b. 1933, elementary occupations, North East, married)

Interviewer: Big readers when the children were small?

Interviewee: Not really, no. I never seemed to have the time. Only time I used to make time was if Catherine Cookson had a novel out. 'Cos I like her, you know –

Interviewer: She's a local?

Interviewee: Ah, a proper Geordie, and when you're reading her books you're killing your sides with laughing.

Interviewer: Was your husband a big reader?

Interviewee: No.

This extract is more typical of the gendered pattern of reading reported in '100 Families': note that again the husband is not reported as a reader. Elsewhere in the interview Mary Lear names Cookson's books and says 'I do a lot of those'. Like many of Radway's readers, and the interviewees quoted above, who describe how reading temporarily interrupts their domestic role with a young family, Lear suggests that looking after small children does not easily leave time to read.⁴⁰ She has to 'make time' for Cookson, perhaps by carrying out her domestic work in similar haste to Mrs Roy and 'Stalybridge parent'.

In her work on the popularity of family sagas in the 1970s and 1980s, Christine Bridgwood notes that the genre's success was in part down to a strategy of reducing the distance between author and reader, presenting the author as a knowable woman with whom the reader could easily identify. Such novels almost invariably open with a short bio that stresses the author's humble origins, personal struggles and triumphs, and the real-life family inspiration for her work. Through this, 'cosy, intimate, first-name terms are being established'. Bridgwood directly contrasts this strategy with the 'anonymity and interchangeability' of standard romance novelists such as Mills & Boon authors.⁴¹ Referring to the author Maisie Mosco, Bridgwood notes the publisher's emphasis on her 'northern roots', and the importance of these to her work. This recalls the categorisation in Mary Lear's interview – by both interviewer and interviewee – of Cookson as 'a local' and a 'proper Geordie'.

The only other author to be mentioned in '100 Families' as frequently as Cookson is Barbara Cartland. Again, this may be unsurprising given Cartland's prominence during the period. During the mid-1980s, just at the time the interviews were being conducted, Cartland was the bestselling author in the world.⁴² Not only that, but Cartland herself was a regular figure in the media, her public persona of pink fluff and feathers reaching self-parodic proportions over the course of the decade.⁴³ Where Cookson drew on her working-class roots, presenting herself as not so very different from her readership, Cartland might well be viewed as the authorial antithesis to this approach. Indeed, during the 1980s Cartland can be seen to be defined by her otherness, from her foregrounding of her upper-class credentials to the increasing eccentricity of her appearance.⁴⁴ Whilst the fictional world of dashing upper-class Counts in grand drawing rooms continued to appeal to her millions of devoted fans, Cartland's outspokenness on moral and political issues of the day made her a controversial figure. She became a mouthpiece for right-wing moral and social conservatism, claiming that 'the increasing divorce rate, homosexuality, male impotence, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies have their roots in the "very inferior women produced by the last two generations"', whom she charged with the 'desertion of their role as guardians of public morality and the inspiration of true love.'⁴⁵

Taking place at the height of Cartland's media omnipresence, the '100 Families' interviews inadvertently captured a snapshot of the public's response to her. Whereas Cookson was unanimously admired and enjoyed by those who mentioned her, readers' relationships with Cartland were much less complimentary. Olwen Farrand (d.o.b. 1914, associate professional and technical occupations, East, married) identifies herself as a life-long non-reader, but recalls one exception when she read Cartland's romance novels while taking shelter with her infant son during air raids in the Second World War:

No, I've never been a reader. Only during the War. [...] I used to block meself up with cushions here with me feet in front of him and I put a big eiderdown over the two of us and I used to get these damn romantic novels of – of her that was on the television the other night – what's-her-name – Barbara Cartland – all blimin' romantic stuff with happy endings and I used to – there was a sweet shop there that had this lending library, so I used to go there and I used to get these books, I used to have a little lamp like this and I used to fetch it up here like that – switch the big light out – and have the little lamp there and I'd read these damn novels. But – that's the only time I ever did any reading.

As for Mary Lear, who did not usually read but made an exception for Cookson's novels, Cartland's novels seem memorable to Olwen Farrand because these were the only novels she read, during this one period of her life. This interviewee now appears entirely unimpressed with Cartland, describing her work as 'damn romantic novels', 'blimin' romantic stuff with happy endings' and, again, 'these damn novels'. However, her reading of Cartland's novels was a repeated activity, becoming part of the routine of sheltering. Clearly this is a woman who is not interested in reading and who was not persuaded by her encounters with Cartland. She tops and tails the anecdote with an avowal that this was a unique situation: 'Only during the War. [...] But – that's the only time I ever did any reading'.

Although not generally a reader, in this very particular situation of wartime it seems likely that Olwen read Cartland's romances at least partly for purposes of self-distraction. Katie Halsey has found a clear trend of escapist reading during the Second World War, using different kinds of evidence including Mass Observation diaries, UK Reading Experience Database entries, and the oral testimony of a single reader. Although free time was limited due to additional work and restrictions during the war, Halsey specifically mentions how blackouts kept people at home in the evenings and that time spent in air raid shelters was used for reading. While some readers were critical of the 'trashy love stories' that were available, '[m]any wanted precisely *not* to engage with their real lives, and some explicitly recognized that their taste for "light books and escapist stuff" was related to a desire to forget the world of war for a brief moment.'⁴⁶ Considering the temporal context within which the '100 Families' interview took place, it could be argued that the desire for 'escapist stuff' – accepted as useful within the context of Home Front life – is at odds with the contemporary world in which the interviewee narrated the anecdote. Note that Olwen

makes reference to Cartland in the present day: 'her that was on the television the other night', highlighting Cartland's prevalence in the mid-1980s. Cartland's prime-time reactionary statements sat uneasily alongside a rise in feminist discourses, which were themselves finding increasing mainstream expression. Feminist views were also completely at odds with Cartland's fictional world of passive, virginal women and brutal but irresistible male heroes.⁴⁷ Olwen may, then, have something in common with the female readers with whom this essay started, for whom reading provided some temporary escape from domestic work, but in this case its escapist function is used specifically at wartime. The cultural denigration of romance, and particularly the controversial figure of Cartland at the time, seems to fuel Olwen's strong and repeated assertions that she has not at any other time read such 'damn romantic novels', or indeed anything at all.

Elsewhere Cartland is derided without direct reference to her work. Peter Coverley (d.o.b. 1915, professional, North West, widowed) recalled growing up in a family of readers, but, through employing value judgements about certain types of literature, situated himself above the rest of his family:

[W]e used to be in quite a bit [Peter, his mother and sisters]. Talking and singing. My mother was a great singer, she was a lovely singer, and she was very fond of poetry. I used to read to her as well so we knew quite a lot of verse and we were all very keen readers... I read everything that came my way. It didn't matter what it was. Rubbish and good stuff, as well. Eventually they used to dislike me at home at times because they would bring home library books and I'd say "Oh, that's rubbish" you know. Marie Corelli was one of the romantic, almost mystical, novelists at the time - rubbish really, but she was the sort of Barbara Cartland of the time. Ethel M. Dell and all these people. I despised those, you see.

Although he suggests that his family enjoyed various art forms (music, poetry, fiction), Peter Coverley nonetheless goes on to paint himself as a cut above in terms of taste and, by implication, intelligence. Specifically, he derides the reading choices of the female members of his family as well as genre fiction typically considered to be for a female audience. This interviewee uses the triptych of Corelli, Cartland and Dell - each of whom wrote sensational romances and were extremely popular in their day - to represent a certain type of sentimental and poor-quality writing.⁴⁸ By stating that Corelli was 'the sort of Barbara Cartland of her time', he instates Cartland as both a shorthand for romance fiction and authors, as well as the defining romance author of the 1980s. Here Cartland is guilty by association and there is no direct indication that the interviewee's family members actually read her work. Nonetheless, Cartland and other romance fiction is dismissed as 'rubbish', with the interviewee making no bones about the fact that he, even as an adolescent, 'despised' such fiction.

In contrast to Christie's and Cookson's, then, Cartland's novels are disparaged in the '100 Families' interviews, and those who admit to reading them make it clear that they are capable of discerning their trashiness. Another interviewee, Mary Moran (d.o.b. 1928, manager and senior official, East, married), similarly distinguishes herself from an indiscriminating female readership, scaling up from female family members to the 'millions of women in this country [who] read her [Cartland's] books, you know, that rubbish she pours out'. Again, here, we have an image of women not only being indiscriminating but also reading a lot – 'that rubbish she pours out' – in this case on a national scale, paralleling much broader cultural associations between mass readerships and low quality. Moran seems to echo the concerns and language of a critic like Richard Hoggart, who in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) had discussed how popular novels 'pour from publishing-houses', and 'just poured out' of a girl who had written several by the time she was 21. Such metaphorical pouring denotes a view that the novels are produced (and consumed) rapidly in vast quantities without any intellectual effort whatsoever. Although Hoggart does not explicitly call these novels 'rubbish', on reading 'a number of cheap romances' he judges their writers conventional and 'competent' rather than intellectual, without any kind of development in contrast to 'serious writers'. He describes readers in turn consuming the novels at a speed that is mostly useless for 'worthwhile reading'.⁴⁹

Solitary reading: Men's 'specific books' and newspapers

Across the '100 Families' interviews, the image of women reading lots of light or trashy novels, and getting lost in them, is often juxtaposed against non-reading or more apparently discriminating, purposefully reading men. Once more, the following interviewee remembers his mother's indiscriminate reading of books in which she would 'lose herself for days':

Ian Crew (d.o.b. 1942, technical occupations, North West, married)

Interviewer: Were your parents readers?

Interviewee: My mother was. My father not really, he'd read specific books, rather than general books, anything to do with motor cars he used to read, you know, the racing drivers' biographies and that sort of thing, and again he knew, with being in the trade, he knew a lot of the, both the racing drivers and the motor cycle, you know the TT races and all this sort of thing. He went over there to, I don't know whether it was to promote the business or not, so anybody, any of these racer drivers that wrote their autobiographies, he was keen on, and anything to do with mechanical things and new engines, and all this sort of thing he used to, he didn't, he didn't light read, I don't, he wouldn't be in the house and pick up a book, the latest novel, it was always sort of specific, and me mother would read anything for some reason or other, you know, again, all her family were great readers, and she'd pick up a book and lose herself for days in it.

In opposition to his mother's seemingly undirected reading, the interviewee positions his father's reading as purposeful and having practical application. His interest in reading about racing and racing drivers at first glance appears to be linked to his work 'in the trade'. However, taking a closer look at the excerpt, there does not seem to be any explicit way in which his reading of racing driver biographies would help him in his everyday work. And later in the interview he reveals that this everyday work was as a mechanic, running a standard garage for the general public. Reading about racing cars, then, would not have had quite the functional application that the interviewee at first suggests. Rather it can be inferred that motorsport and the racing world were leisure interests for this man; certainly linked to his job, but not quite as directly as the interviewee implies. Nonetheless, this hobby of reading about motorsport is treated very differently from the mother's hobby of reading fiction. Whereas the father's reading is twice described as 'specific', the mother is recalled as reading 'anything for some reason or other'. The technique of negation is employed to define reading habits and tastes. Here the father's specialised reading is elevated by not being 'light' reading. It is implied, by extension, that the mother's generic reading was 'light', perhaps the 'latest novel'. Within this context the memory of the mother 'losing herself' in books – common, as we have seen, in descriptions of female readers – suggests her hobby of reading to be frivolous and undiscerning, taking her out of the world, whilst the father's reading supposedly is focused, assisting him in his day-to-day life.

This essay has shifted from Radway's proposition that women read romantic fiction as a way of temporarily refusing domestic work or the demands of family, to the more general image of women escaping or getting 'lost' in 'light', if not always romantic fiction, rather than engaging purposefully in the world. Through her ethnographic approach to seeking out in some depth the perspectives of romance readers themselves, Radway was able to challenge gendered stereotypes of them as susceptible victims with the understanding of romance reading as a form of 'valid, if limited, protest'. Female readers in the '100 Families' interviews report reading before carrying out domestic work and becoming absorbed in novels, indicating how their reading may similarly operate as a form of temporary escape from, or even resistance to their traditional self-negating social roles, but this line of enquiry is not pursued in these interviews, while other family members present more conventional, stereotyped views of gendered reading. Women are said to read light or trashy fiction in which they 'lose' themselves. The female readers do not present themselves precisely as 'lost' in fiction; this is the language used by grown up children recalling their mothers, as though the latter are unable to resist the narrative's influence and to find their purpose in domestic reality,⁵⁰ or perhaps hinting at the children's own sense of loss and resentment at their absence. Fathers' reading is often presented in contrast as directed and focused on practical or informative reading material, most usually being restricted to newspapers. Crew's interview, however, begins to indicate how male reading may be as disconnected from day-to-day practicalities as female reading.

In many of the interviews, the image of men reading newspapers becomes a central scene in daily family life. Specifically, that image is often of a solitary reader, the man and

the newspaper a single unit, closed off from the rest of the family. If the novel delays mothers' engagement with domestic work and her family, in the following interview it is the TV news or the newspaper that delays the father's arrival at the dinner table and his interaction with the family:

Rebecca Robertson (d.o.b. 1970, student, North West, single)

It always takes Dad half an hour to come to the table, he's always watching the news, or reading the paper, that's a typical...

Another female interviewee similarly evoked a strong image of the routine nature of family life in the description of her newspaper-reading brother at the breakfast table:

Kathleen Lunan (d.o.b. 1916, sales and customer services, North West, married)

I used to leave him reading the paper and eating his bacon and eggs, and that was regular as clockwork.

In both cases, the male newspaper reader is recalled as being utterly routine in their reading activities (the father apparently 'always' took 'half an hour', while the brother was 'regular as clockwork'), and also as solitary: taking time to join the family at the table when reading, or staying on at the table reading when his sister leaves. It is also striking how robust this activity of male newspaper reading is: the two interviews recall experiences over a period of around 50 years (Rebecca is talking about the present in the 1980s; Kathleen the 1930s). Kathleen goes on to describe how her brother would visit her family later in life, and would read rather than talk: 'he used to come on a Sunday for his tea and he'd settle down with the Sunday paper here which we got - and he didn't, and read the paper. Then he might go to sleep.'

Leah Price has discussed the prevalence of the image of husbands fending off wives with newspapers in Victorian literature, while papers and books also feature more generally as shields for both sexes against family members and servants.⁵¹ Here we can again see a continuity across periods, particularly with the newspaper being used by men to fend off family members. Mary Lear (quoted above for making an exception for Cookson, as she claims to not usually have had time to read) similarly recalls that her father 'Always got an *Evening Chronicle*' which he 'always read to himself... after he'd had his tea':

Interviewer: When your dad was reading a newspaper or anything did he read out bits and pieces to you?

Mary: No. No, always read to himself.

Interviewer: Was that his quiet time?

Mary: Ah huh. After he'd had his tea and that.

Interviewer: And you had to leave him on his own and...?

Mary: Oh uh huh. He didn't like to be disturbed.

Male newspaper reading, then, may be comparable to female novel reading in providing a way of making time for oneself or for resisting engagement with the demands of a family. A difference is that while the women read before carrying out domestic work – such as preparing meals – the men here read before, during, and after their consumption of meals. It is also notable that men's reading is often framed in narratives of consistency and temporal regularity, while women's reading times are snatched moments or conducted in stolen time. Men's reading is also very much on show, like a Do Not Disturb sign, whereas women's reading is often furtive, involving strategies for keeping it undiscovered like running around doing the housework after a day of reading. The men in these interviews seem to use newspaper reading as a communication barrier, while women seem primarily to be putting off domestic labour. Radway's observations that women's reading often gives them time out from their families' needs, 'a task that is solely and peculiarly theirs'⁵², cannot precisely be mapped on to men's reading. For many women whose work is entirely or at least largely within the home, reading may be crucial for establishing opportunities to escape or 'switch off' in that same environment, whereas men's work is more usually outside the home. For Lunan as for many other interviewees, gender roles were clearly divided:

My father believed in the man being the captain of the ship, as he called it... of course a lot of the time he wasn't here because he was at work, but his rules were very stern, and he believed there were certain things that women did and certain things that men did... Cooking and keeping the place clean and washing were women's work, and never did he have anything to do with food whatsoever.

Bearing in mind the differences between gender roles, reasons for reading (to avoid housework and/or to avoid family communication), reading material and value judgements of that material (women's novel-reading being denigrated more usually than men's non-fiction reading), the activity of reading may nevertheless be comparable in some respects. The '100 Families' archive indicates how men's reading can be as escapist as women's reading. We might find further support for this claim in Edmund King's and Jane Potter's investigations into how men read popular fiction, including romance novels, for escapist purposes during the First World War,⁵³ which seems comparable to Olwen Farrand's reading above, and beyond this specific situation the '100 Families' interviews indicate how men's reading may be more generally escapist in a domestic, family context. Although it is only women who are said to get 'lost' in fiction, and whose reading is regularly disparaged or defended against pervasive stereotypes of romance novels as frivolous, further investigation into men's reading could reveal the different but comparable ways in which it provides a way of demarcating time and space away from domestic reality.

It is perhaps hard to grasp, or even to approach such comparisons considering the long, engrained history of opposition between different kinds of reading, including perceptions of male and female reading; judicious and voracious reading; purposeful or intellectual and ordinary, pleasurable reading.⁵⁴ There is the well-established history of male reading being regarded as more respectable than female reading, which can be traced through the historical deprecation of 'romance' from a worthy masculine genre to a trashy, feminine form, as mentioned above.⁵⁵ There is also the working-class autodidact tradition of men reading to educate and "improve themselves", to which women began to be sporadically admitted from the late nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Across the classes, men's reading material has tended to be valued more highly than women's, as has their reading as an activity: men's reading habits are more likely to be perceived as worthy and women's as 'escapist and mindless'. Perceived differences between men's and women's reading are likely exacerbated by our disciplinary and sub-disciplinary specialisms, such as a literary feminist focus on female romance readers in opposition to canonical interests in male authors or genres. Rita Felski's work in contrast sketches out some comparisons between different kinds of reading, between literary critics' and autodidacts' accounts of absorption in "highbrow" literature and those of susceptible women in "low" culture, which are 'tied together by a common experience of enchantment, of total absorption in a text.'⁵⁷ Although the instances of male reading in '100 Families' quoted above do not precisely describe such absorption in literary texts, there is a point of connection in how reading allows both men and women to demarcate a solitary space for themselves within the home. As Felski puts it, 'you feel yourself enclosed in a bubble of absorbed attention... demarcated by a distinct boundary'.⁵⁸

Kathleen Lunan, whose recollections of her brother's reading is discussed above, also offers an example of a man reading (and writing) academic books, in this case a cousin's husband, an 'authority' on James Joyce. Even when a man's reading is evidently practical, being carried out as part of one's job, it seems no less, indeed more permanently than any of the women's reading, to take him away from any domestic role, in this case to 'a little planet of his own'. Although the reading material is in this instance unusual compared to the great frequency of male newspaper reading, the pattern of reading as opposed to engaging with either domestic work or the family is by now familiar:

He was very highly thought of. He lived on a little planet of his own, you know, they tend to those kind of people, don't they. I mean she [Lunan's cousin] brought these boys up and they're a great credit to her. He really had very little to do with them because he was always poring over his books, all the time.

In these interviews, then, men's reading material typically consists of newspapers or at least non-fictional texts as opposed to the 'light' fiction read by women, but reading as an activity or behaviour seems comparable. Reading is described in many interviews with, and about, both men and women, as a solitary activity that is opposed to domestic or family life. As

such, it seems to cut not only across genders but across classes and genres, from the “low” to the “highbrow”. It seems likely that this Joyce scholar would have viewed his reading as utterly different from that of the romance-reading housewife, but in Lunan’s account it seems at least as escapist, allowing him to live on his own ‘little planet’. As feminist academics, we might by now be quite used to defending the escapist romance-reader against widespread cultural derision, but in this final instance criticism is directed against the “heaviest” of reading - reading of experimental modernist fiction and critique rather than of formulaic genre fiction; reading that *is* work, as well as being opposed to domestic work - that is carried out by a male academic apparently at the permanent expense of his family.

Felski acknowledges important differences between forms of reading such as professional-critical and romance reading, but also observes that ‘professional critics were once lay readers’ and calls for engagement ‘with ordinary motives for reading - such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape - that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship.’⁵⁹ Felski’s discussion of absorption nevertheless hinges mostly around written accounts provided by critics and other readers who describe and at times perhaps even romanticise their own reading as a kind of special, transcendent state of enchantment, whereas these memories and descriptions in ‘100 Families’ of men reading are provided by other family members. What these oral history interviewees seem to provide – inherently less invested in reading and in their own written reputation – are accounts of a form of reading that may not necessarily, in all cases be utterly absorbing or especially enchanting, but does serve to provide a means of escape or release from the daily grind of domestic work and from family, a period of solitude.

In this article we have come to emphasise how reading can be an unsociable activity, while recent commentators have often presented reading in contrast as social.⁶⁰ Many instances of sociable reading can also be found in the interviews, particularly in the numerous accounts of parents reading to children – more often mothers, but also in many cases fathers. This article has emphasised individual reading but has also referred to occasions when people read together, as in the couple reading Cookson’s novels on holiday. In another interview, Juliet Merry (d.o.b. 1964; associate professional and technical occupations; South East; married) indicates how reading can be both social and anti-social. She suggests that her parents read (and walked) together, while her father also used books to avoid socialising beyond the family:

I think they just went walking. They both loved reading. They both loved reading. [...] They didn’t have many friends. My father didn’t like neighbours coming into the house. That was – if a neighbour came in, then my father in a way could be quite rude and he would sort of take his book and go into the other room or go upstairs. He didn’t like – so my mother didn’t have many friends. They didn’t have many friends, you know.

It is not clear what kinds of books her parents read, but books are strikingly positioned here as important both to their relationship as a couple and to their isolation from others. Her father's use of 'his book' to avoid others is emphasised through the repetition of how they 'didn't have many friends'. His handling of the book as object is reminiscent of the 'pseudoreading' outlined by Price as a strategy of spouse avoidance in Victorian Britain⁶¹, except here it is a strategy of avoiding people beyond the family. In the '100 Families' interviews, reading features both as a strong bond in family relationships, while books and other kinds of reading material are also used to secure solitude or even isolation, both within and beyond the family.

One of Price's examples is from Anthony Trollope's *The Prime Minister*, where it 'establishes the breakdown of a marriage by pitting Palliser's newspaper against Glencora's novel: "He busied himself with books and papers,--always turning over those piles of newspapers... She engaged herself with the children or pretended to read a novel."' ⁶² This distinction in reading material as well as in the ways of engaging with that material again seems sustained from the Victorian period to the 1980s, with the emphasis on the husband occupied with his newspapers and the wife with a novel. The wife's novel ensures that the husband's briefly mentioned 'books' are not mistaken for such a thing. What Juliet Merry's parents were reading is not clear, but the reference to 'a book' indicates that it could certainly be non-fiction as opposed to the novel that interviewees so often referred to when discussing women's reading. And like Palliser with his books, it seems unlikely that Juliet's father in this situation would read much, or at least the primary purpose of the book is for self-extraction rather than for reading. As Price comments, the book's function 'depends less on its being looked at by the character who holds it than on that person's being looked at himself.'⁶³

In the novel, the wife also 'pretended to read', in contrast to the Stalybridge parent with whom we started this article, who pretends *not* to read. The latter would read all day 'when nobody was looking [...] pretend I'd been busy all day.' This distinction can help us briefly and finally reiterate a difference between methodologies and sources. As Price acknowledges, her own study of how the book operates as a material thing in Victorian Britain, challenging the primacy given to reading in reader-response theories and reception histories, is based on the evidence of her own reading. The reading is 'skewed toward the literary canon'⁶⁴, and we can go so far as to imagine that the novels she analyses could contain an element of anticipatory self-reflection in their depictions of novel-reading. As part of a reputable, highly esteemed conservative canon, the novel that Glencora (a Duchess) is a character in could become precisely the kind of novel she is seen to be reading. The novel the Stalybridge parent is (not seen to be) reading is more likely to be a romance. While we have also relied on reading and analysing written texts, the oral history transcripts are of course a very different kind of source. In their derivation from social-historical methods of selection we are far more likely to encounter working-class women and to hear/read their own first-person accounts of reading, and of seeing others reading, as part of everyday family life.

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Notes:

¹ Thompson, P., Newby, H. (2005). *Families, Social Mobility and Ageing, an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988*. [data collection]. UK Data Service.. SN: 4938. For catalogue and further

information about the archive see the UK Data Service catalogue entry

<http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue?sn=4938> (accessed 3/1/2019).

² Rosemary Elliot, 'Growing up and Giving up: Smoking in Paul Thompson's 100 Families', *Oral History* 29: 1 (2001), 73-84.

³ Graham Smith plans to lead another article which will discuss our methods of using NVivo further.

⁴ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p.5.

⁵ Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke, and Chris Weedon, 'Some women reading' in *Rewriting English* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp.140-154. This essay takes a semi-ethnographic approach in seeking 'to discover readers' experiences in their own terms' (p.145).

⁶ Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: 'Gone With the Wind' and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989).

⁷ For more on the Reading Experience Database see www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/ (accessed 16 November 2016). Following Lyons and Taksa's *Australian Readers Remember* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992) oral history of reading projects include Reading Sheffield and Memories of Fiction as discussed in the Introduction of this Themed Section.

⁸ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.11

⁹ See, for example, Alison Light, "'Returning to Manderley": Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review* 16 (1984), 7-25; Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁰ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.12

¹¹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp.47-8, 61.

¹² Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.49.

¹³ Batsleer *et al*, 'Some women reading', p.151.

¹⁴ Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, p.4

¹⁵ Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, pp.162. 'Men had privileged access to the daily newspaper', but Lyons and Taksa go on to discuss how men and women among their sample read and take interest in different sections of it (e.g. births, deaths and marriages for women; sporting pages for men). See also Ian Collinson's *Everyday Readers* for further observations of such gendered reading materials (London: Equinox, 2009), especially Chapter 3, pp.60-1. For Collinson's methods, including his interview sample (consisting of 21 interviews with readers, four of whom were men, and all but one of whom were educated beyond school), see pp.28-30. See also Christine Hardy, 'Women's reading constructs and their impact on reading behaviours', in the Special Edition of *Participations* 5: 2 (2008), 'Beyond the Book'. Hardy carried out 14 ethnographic interviews with members of one family, to explore how they develop reading constructs which form part of their self-concepts as readers or non-readers which remain stable throughout life. These constructs take place within the family, leading to Hardy's observation that 'when book reading did occur in the home for these respondents, it was normally the mothers who read books for leisure. Fathers in the sample read newspapers and periodicals, with very few reading books.'

¹⁶ Lyons and Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember*, p.158.

¹⁷ Lyons and Taksa, p.158. Anne-Marie Thiesse found the same responses among the women she interviewed for *Le Roman du Quotidien: lecteurs et lectures populaires à la belle époque* (Paris: Le Chemin Vert, 1984).

¹⁸ Radway explains that her study was mainly of 'married, middle-class mothers with at least a high school education', in 'Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context', *Feminist*

Studies 9: 1 (1983), 57. Such biases seem hard to escape if the starting point is readers, as Lyons and Taksa found (see above). Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's 'Methods Appendix' explain that they similarly sought out diversity but the focus group participants were mostly 'well-educated', white middle class women, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p.292. Other examples include the interviewees for Collins's *Everyday Readers*, who were mainly middle class women (p.29).

¹⁹ This is not a quantitative study, but to give some sense of proportions, out of 170 interviews we identified 98 which mentioned some kind of reading material, including newspapers (57) and novels (32).

²⁰ Radway, 'What's the Matter with Reception Study? Some Thoughts on the Disciplinary Origins, Conceptual Constraints, and Persistent Viability of a Paradigm', in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, edited by James L. Machor, and Philip Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.337.

²¹ Further examples include Katie Halsey, *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786-1945* (London: Anthem, 2012); Mel Gibson, *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015); and Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, which puts 'actual readers, rather than the texts that they read, at the center of investigation' - these readers being those who participate in certain Mass Reading Events, and who 'already identified themselves as readers' (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp.40 & 46.

²² For catalogue information about the archive see the UK Data Service catalogue entry <http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue?sn=2000> (accessed 10 January 2019)

²³ Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.248.

²⁴ Price, 'Reading: The State of the Discipline', *Book History* 7 (2004), 315-316.

²⁵ For Reading Sheffield see www.readingsheffield.co.uk/readers, and for Memories of Fiction see www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Memories-Of-Fiction/Archive (both accessed 4 January 2019).

²⁶ An early example is Raphael Samuel, 'The Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History* 1: 2 (1971), 19-22. In future, work could be done to access the audio versions of these interviews and to analyse whether the sounds of the voices could contribute to interpretation of meaning, but this is beyond the scope of this current article which is concerned with the drawbacks as well as the benefits of reusing oral history archives.

²⁷ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.54. Radway discusses how Dot helped defend her readers' preferences for romance fiction, as they often felt guilty about spending money on books 'regularly ridiculed by the media, their husbands, and their children.'

²⁸ Radway, *Reading*, p.47.

²⁹ See the full project title in endnote 1 above.

³⁰ Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p.52.

³¹ Batsleer et al give an account of this historical trajectory in 'Some women reading', pp.71-3.

³² Batsleer et al, p.73.

³³ Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers', in *A History of Reading in the West*, eds. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p.319.

³⁴ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p.4.

³⁵ Littau, *Theories of Reading* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006) p.20. For discussion of female absorption, and absorption more generally, see also Rita Felski's chapter on 'Enchantment', in *The Uses of Literature*, to which we will return later in this essay (pp.51-76).

³⁶ Deborah Jones, 'Gossip: Notes on Women's Oral Culture', *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 3 (1980), 193-8.

³⁷ Radway, *Reading*, pp.90-3, 100-104. Batsleer et al. also observe male resentment at women reading, pp.152-153.

³⁸ When coding the interviews (using NVivo) we noted 96 references to newspapers (in 57 interviews) and 43 references to novels (in 32 interviews). The next highest categories were magazines (30 references in 28 interviews) and the Bible (30 references in 19 interviews). Although less prominent, magazines also featured in the gendered dichotomy in which interviewees report practical or factual material being read by men (to be discussed further), as in an interview with Louise Beckwith (b. 1970; single; Sales and customer service occupations, North East): 'me father sorta bought, like – practical electronics and – things like that. / [...] Interviewer: What about your mum, did she like reading? / Subject: I think she read women's magazines.' Magazines also have practical purposes, however, for example containing knitting patterns. Although beyond the scope of this article, magazines could certainly enrich analysis of gendered reading in this archive and further enable comparisons between what and how men and women were reading.

³⁹ Cookson's first novel came out in 1952 and she continued to publish until her death in 2002. During the 1980s she published twenty two novels plus an autobiography. From 1985-2002 she was the most borrowed author from public libraries in the UK. (Public Lending Renumeration, <https://www.plr.uk.com/mediaCentre/chartToppers/2001-2002ChartToppers.pdf>, accessed 30/01/17).

⁴⁰ Interviewees for Lyons and Taksa's *Australian Readers Remember* similarly asserted that women had no time for reading as they were too busy carrying out their domestic duties. 'Oliver C.'s mother was 'mainly concerned with making a living and giving us something to eat', for example (which can be contrasted against Mrs Schlarman's view of her mother prioritising reading over eating). These interviews thus also demonstrate an opposition between the time-consuming activities of reading and housework, and from the perspective of other family members as well as readers themselves, although the primary focus is on readers' own lives rather than on family.

⁴¹ Christine Bridgwood, 'Family Romances: The Contemporary Popular Family Saga', in Jean Radford (ed.), *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, London, 1986, pp.167-93 (p.169). For more on Cookson and Cartland, and the differences and similarities between their novels as romance fiction, see *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), pp.92-105

⁴² McWhirter in Marsha Vanderford Doyle, 'The Rhetoric of Romance: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Barbara Cartland Novels', *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51:1 (1986), 24-48 (p.26).

⁴³ See for example Cartland on Terry Wogan's chat show on BBC1, July 1987 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ckwqs91bfl> (accessed 26 October 2015).

⁴⁴ Michele Roberts conjures up a bizarre image in recalling her encounter with the author: 'Then I met Cartland herself. She *looked* like a breast [author's italics]: she was big and round and dressed in pink; she was swollen up like a meringue; she was a heap of sugar; she went on and on about honey.' Michele Roberts, 'Write, She Said', in ed. Jean Radford, *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, pp.221-35 (227).

⁴⁵ Radford, *The Progress*, p.25.

⁴⁶ Halsey, “‘Something light’”, in eds. Katie Halsey and W. R. Owens, *The History of Reading, Volume 2: Evidence from the British Isles, c.1750-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp.84-100 (93).

⁴⁷ See Deborah Philips on the rise of feminist publishing in this period, *Women’s Fiction, 1945-2005: Writing Romance*, London, 2006. Also see Ann Rosalind Jones on the romance genre’s struggle to incorporate or deal with feminism in the 1980s, ‘Mills and Boon meets feminism’, in *The Progress of Romance*, pp.195-218.

⁴⁸ Some of Corelli’s works also focused on mystical topics such as reincarnation and astral projection, and their potential alignment with Christianity, but she also wrote sensational romances of sorts.

⁴⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London: Penguin, 1957), Kindle edition. John Carey traces a history of the association between mass readerships and low quality in *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992); for a more recent discussion see Rick Rylance, *Literature and the Public Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ The trope of women, especially, confusing fiction with reality has circulated widely, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* probably being the best known novel to centre around the tragic consequences of such confusion.

⁵¹ Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), Kindle edn. (Chapter 2: Anthony Trollope and the Repellent Book’.)

⁵² Radway, *Reading*, p.92.

⁵³ Edmund G. C. King, ‘E. W. Hornung’s Unpublished “Diary”, the YMCA, and the Reading Soldier in the First World War’, *English Literature in Translation, 1880-1920*, vol. 57 (2014), 361-387; Jane Potter, “‘Khaki and Kisses’: Reading the Romance Novel in the Great War’, in eds. Shafquat Towheed and Edmund G. C. King, *Reading and the First World War: Readers, Texts, Archives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp.29-44.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Nicola Humble’s observations of how George Orwell and Q. D. Leavis insist on distinguishing between the ‘ordinary reader--uncritical and voracious--and the intellectual reader, who is imagined as calm and judicious’, and how they ‘apply exactly the same terms of distinction to men and women as readers’, in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.18.

⁵⁵ Batsleer et al, pp. 71-3.

⁵⁶ Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.

⁵⁷ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p.54.

⁵⁸ Felski, *Uses*, p.54.

⁵⁹ Felski, *Uses*, pp.12 & 14.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013). The Memories of Fiction project’s oral history interviews with book group readers also has a social strand involving group interviews, represented in the forthcoming essay by Amy Tooth Murphy, “‘Life’s too short to read a bad book’’: Reading groups, pleasure, and the hunt for a “good book””, *Reading Communities: Contemporary Readers and Reading Practices* vol. 2 (2021).

⁶¹ Price, *How to Do Things*, Kindle edn. (Chapter 2, ‘Anthony Trollope and the Repellent Book’.)

⁶² Price, *How to Do Things*, Chapter 2.

⁶³ Price, *How to Do Things*, Chapter 2.

⁶⁴ Price, *How to Do Things*, Chapter 1.