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'*Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading* - Conference Papers'

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Guest Editorial Introduction

Book clubs have become so ubiquitous that an increasing number of novels are being printed with “reading group guides” in the back; many universities require all incoming freshman to read the same book; entire communities organize “one book, one community” events; television shows or radio programs endorse books that immediately become bestsellers as they’re ordered by book clubs around the country, and government bodies organize national campaigns intended to promote a culture of reading among their citizens. Yet research into reading practices has been relatively slow to develop. The three-year, interdisciplinary *Beyond the Book* Project was organized to develop a transnational analysis of reading practices and reading communities, especially with regard to literary fiction. Reading is not, as was once conceived, simply a solitary pursuit, especially in a world brought together by the internet and the global mass-marketing of literature. Nor is reading necessarily book-based, although often those who consume non-book material are not characterized as “readers” in popular parlance. Yet from their enthusiastic participation in everything from book clubs to fandoms, readers have increasingly been understood in academia as self-organizing, dynamic creators of cultural meaning who derive satisfaction from sharing and comparing their “readings” with others.

In 2007, the *Beyond the Book* project hosted the *Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading* conference at the University of Birmingham, attracting an international, multidisciplinary group of scholars and experts interested in how and why people come together in both formal and informal reading communities. One of the important aspects of the conference was that it brought together and generated dialogue between academics researching reading processes, reading groups, and the like, and experts aiming to promote reading itself (e.g., reading group organizers, educationalists, and librarians). This was significant in at least two ways. First, it illustrated the ways in which reader research is an engaged area of work, with implications for cultural studies and other disciplines. Second, of course, it showed the relatively high and secure status held by books and reading, as compared to other cultural forms and practices.

The six papers in this special issue have been drawn from or inspired by works presented at the *Beyond the Book* conference. They vary in scope from the individual to the international level, using methodologies ranging from in-depth ethnographic interviews to a broader meta-analysis of published research. Together, they provide a cross-section of

contemporary reader analysis and illustrate both the commonalities that unite and the differences that divide reading communities.

On the individual and interpersonal levels, [Christine Hardy](#) and [Vanhée Olivier](#) both look at individuals' childhoods and relationships to understand how individuals define — or fail to define — themselves as “readers” and the ways in which these histories and relationships affect their reading choices and interactions with others. Hardy pays particular attention to women who do *not* define themselves as readers, who prefer not to read books for pleasure after their primary schooling. She also describes the circumstances that might change that self-definition, and the limitations and boundaries that circumscribe such a change. To the extent that reading is a culturally valued pursuit and some may wish to understand how to inculcate reading habits in, especially, girls and women, this paper offers useful insights into the development of self-definitions and the external circumstances that help or hinder reading practices in adulthood.

Olivier focuses on young French readers of the Harry Potter novels, categorizing them according to their families' social class and cultural capital, their early reading history, and the ways they prefer to approach the books as readers. Whereas Hardy shows how social relationships affect a woman's consumption of books, Olivier shows how the consumption of books affect a reader's social relationships; she further demonstrates that readers do not address texts in a homogenous manner but instead may have very nuanced views of their own, and others' reading practices.

Moving to reading communities and communication on a broader, international stage, [Ann Steiner](#), [Sarah Pederson](#), and I address internet-based reader interactions. Steiner looks at readers' reviews and criticism, paying special attention to book reviews posted on Amazon.Com — is the shift to amateur criticism on the web changing the shape of book reviews or simply repeating the same old patterns? Her analysis of reviews of “commercial” and “literary” works on Amazon.Com suggests that the internet and its options of anonymity have opened up much more opportunity for amateur reviewers to express themselves, but that their styles and modes of address offer both differences from and similarities to established modes of professional criticism.

While Steiner's article looks at the ways in which individuals address and delineate potential reading communities through the style of their book reviews, Pedersen's work looks at patterns of nationality and gender as they affect recommendations for further reading — and thus, by extension, the shape of the English-language blogosphere — among bloggers in the U.K. and U.S. If the blogosphere is, as has been argued by some critics U.S.-dominated and inherently sexist, how do bloggers' own linking practices help shape it?

My article further broadens the scope of international reading communities by describing and discussing the reading practices of English-reading and Italian-reading fans of Japanese “boys' love” manga, or graphic novels. This large, global fandom consumes both legally licensed and printed, and illegally scanned and downloaded, manga and acts

as creators, consumers, and publishers themselves. The relationship between these readers and commercial manga publishers, at least in the U.S., has generally been cooperative and mutually tolerant, with both acknowledging each others' importance to the genre's success.

Finally, **Patricia Huion** takes a meta-analytic perspective of reading scholarship, asking how scholars themselves describe reading groups and their participants. Analyzing a variety of recent academic texts about reading groups, Huion describes five different ways in which reading groups have been, or can be, conceptualized by researchers, according to different discursive foci. Her work seems like a fitting one with which to end this special issue, as it simultaneously invites further research on reading communities and reminds us researchers that we are, ourselves, part of a reading community and that our work is, too, a text to be read and interpreted.

This special issue of *Participations* concludes the journal's fifth year online. With contributors drawn from Belgium, France, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S., I believe this issue furthers *Participations'* mission of furthering audience and reception studies across academic disciplines and from a variety of methodological approaches. Furthermore, I hope it will call attention to the *Beyond the Book's* ongoing goal of researching reading communities from a transnational perspective and in such a way that will be of practical use to proponents of reading, from event organizers to policymakers. In that spirit, the six papers here all offer insights into reading definitions or practices that should be of use to anyone trying to promote reading practices or work in a more nuanced way with various sorts of reading communities.

I'd like to extend my deepest appreciation to the organizers of the *Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading* conference, to those colleagues whose work appears in this issue, and to Martin Barker, who invited conference participants to present their work in this issue of *Participations*. It's been an honor to participate in this project.

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