

## **‘A Dirty Little Secret’: Taste Hierarchies and Richard and Judy’s Book Club**

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### **Abstract**

This paper locates Richard and Judy’s Book Club within hierarchies of taste in contemporary British society. Analysing the words of both media commentators and readers interviewed in focus groups, it identifies pervasive patterns of suspicion and general disparagement circulating in the discourse about the show’s book club, and explores how and why this stigma is expressed. Using methodologies from corpus linguistics to identify recurring patterns in language usage across a large number of media texts in three different national contexts, it considers the way the book club is discussed in the British press and how this differs from the kinds of discourses employed to talk about comparable nationwide reading events in the US and Canada. The findings include evidence of anxiety that the process of valuing and potentially canonising books is being done by a daytime television programme without the requisite symbolic capital to make decisions about literary matters.

**Keywords:** Richard and Judy’s Book Club, taste hierarchies, book clubs, television, corpus linguistics

I am ashamed to say I am a bit swayed by Richard and Judy, if their sticker is there.  
(‘Michelle’, Bristol, UK, February 17, 2006)

I’m slightly suspicious of the prize stuff and I’m suspicious of Richard and Judy as well, I have to say. Let’s be honest. I was tempted to read a couple of their books, but

I think they may have another agenda.  
(‘Alice’, Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

There’s someone who lives near the charity shop that I visit who reads all the Richard and Judy books, because you go in there every so often and there’s the new Richard and Judy book. And [*Notes on a Scandal*] was the only one that I ever dared pick up ... but it feels more like a dirty little secret that I read it.  
(‘Lisa’, Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

## 1. Background and Aim

The coming together of books and television in the form of Richard and Judy’s Book Club is something that seems fraught with doubt and suspicion, as suggested by the comments above from readers interviewed around the UK. Why might this be so, and why might it be a reader’s ‘dirty little secret’ to have read one of the selected books? The book club has been highly successful [1], and has featured books which have been honoured by awards committees such as Julian Barnes’s *Arthur and George*, Lloyd Jones’s *Mister Pip* (both shortlisted for the Booker Prize) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (winner of the Orange Prize). Yet as a cultural phenomenon it has been all but ignored by literary critics, while media commentators are apt to frame the quality of the chosen texts as surprising, given their association with a daytime television programme (see for example Todd, 2006, pp. 35-36). In their study of cultural omnivores, Warde et al. found that even those whose cultural portfolio extends to items from both high and popular culture distance themselves from television, with daytime television particularly low down the taste scale: the respondent they offer as an example mentions Richard and Judy as one of the daytime television programmes that is ‘a bit of a waste of time’ (2008, pp. 159-160). More generally, the mass media are firmly established as lower down the cultural hierarchy than literary culture (Hartley, 2004, pp. 386-88). In their study of Australian cultural tastes, Bennett et al. found that reading was regarded by their subjects as having a higher value than television (1999, p. 156), while the literary critic J. Hillis Miller lamented the power of globally disseminated media culture ‘to drown out the quiet voice of the fading book culture’ (Graff et al., 1997, p. 1138).

The separation between literary culture and media culture, however, is becoming increasingly blurred, and if analyses of the contemporary literary field are to be representative, they must account for this convergence. In his discussion of the problems involved in accessing the

history of the field of cultural production, Pierre Bourdieu gestures towards the difficulty of recuperating those ‘self-evident donnés of the situation’ which ‘constitute the ‘common sense’ of an intellectual generation’, but which are so fundamental to individuals’ navigation of the cultural field that they are rarely mentioned in contemporary accounts. Among these, he includes information about the range of institutions involved in cultural production and dissemination, the omission of which from social history has the effect of ‘de-realizing’ intellectual and cultural activity, and misrepresenting it as a summit conference of sorts between powerful individuals (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 314). Given the considerable influence wielded by Richard and Judy’s Book Club within the field of contemporary book production—it is thought to have been worth some £150 million in sales since its inception in 2004 (Irvine, 2008)—it would seem to be a prime example of one such institution. Yet its almost total invisibility within the academic study of literature (Bloom, 2007) can be seen as a symptom of this de-realization of the literary field. This seems a compelling reason to attend to it as a cultural phenomenon, in the attempt to reconnect a group of particularly widely-read texts with concrete details of their economic context. It is, furthermore, important to account for its effect on other elements in the field of cultural production, to which, as Bourdieu observes, relationality is central (1983, pp. 311-312). Because the components which constitute the literary field have meaning and value only in relation to all the other items, the alteration of one results in the alteration of others. A book which is featured on Richard and Judy, for example, will be discussed differently, and will signify differently, after it has become associated with the programme. Its position within hierarchies of taste relative to other texts will be altered.

However, discussion about the changes Richard and Judy’s Book Club has wrought on the British book-buying and -selling scene rarely focuses on questions of taste: instead they tend to centre on questions of commerce. My aim here is to explore the way individuals and media commentators articulate perceptions of the Book Club in order to gain a picture of the effects of the programme on taste hierarchies in the UK. In the attempt to put forward reasons why discourses of shame, suspicion and general disparagement circulate around the programme, and to explore some of the ways this stigma is expressed, I analyse the words of both individual readers and media commentators. Using the analytical tools offered by corpus linguistics to identify recurring patterns in language usage across a large number of media texts, I consider the way the book club is discussed in the British press and how this differs from the kinds of discourses employed to talk about comparable nationwide reading events in the US and Canada. Bringing these two perspectives—the private and the public—into conversation, I investigate what the discourse around Richard & Judy’s Book Club might be able to tell us about taste hierarchies in contemporary Britain, and why readers resist seeing books as commodities that can be bought and sold like any others.

## **2. International comparators**

The programmes selected for comparison are Canada Reads and the US programme The Big Read. Canada Reads is a radio programme disseminated annually to the entire country by the national broadcaster, the CBC, consisting of five half-hour debates between five Canadian celebrity panellists who have each chosen one work of Canadian literature to champion. At the end of each show one book is voted off until only one is left, which is the book that all Canadians are then encouraged to read. The Big Read was initiated in 2004 by the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) out of a concern that 'literary reading' was in decline across the country (National Endowment for the Arts, 2005) [2]. The programme funds individual communities to hold events and library programming based around a single book, chosen from the NEA's list of approved titles, most of them canonical works of American literature. Although these two North American programmes differ in their format from Richard and Judy's Book Club, they provide useful points of comparison as they share several important characteristics: they are disseminated across English-speaking industrialised countries, they are contemporaneous, and they are disseminated nationwide under the umbrella of large institutions. The fact that Richard and Judy is disseminated not by a national broadcaster or a national agency is a significant difference, and one to which I will return towards the end of the discussion. In the analysis that follows, I draw on a corpus (or collection) of 389 articles obtained from Nexis on Richard & Judy's Book Club (henceforth abbreviated R&J) [3]. These were published between December 16, 2003 and June 16, 2007 and come to 347,542 words. I also assembled two other corpora for comparison: one with 268 articles and 206,118 words on Canada Reads, and another with 467 articles and 465,234 words on The Big Read.

## **3. Analysis of Corpora of Media Texts**

Asking individuals to articulate taste preferences in a focus group without making them self-conscious or overly mendacious is difficult, and it is extremely helpful to have access to a large body of media discourse and the means to parse it in the attempt to unravel the reasons behind UK readers' disdain for R&J. In her research into young men's readings of men's magazines, Benwell remarks on this same problem: the disparity between what readers explicitly report, which she sees as a performative account oriented to the perceived 'moral frame' of the interview setting, and other more covert currents of meaning left unspoken. She

points to discourse analysis as one methodology with the potential to demonstrate how a particular social and moral order, reflecting broader cultural values, may be constructed by focus group participants, and which may get in the way when researchers attempt to study these individuals' reading habits (2005, p. 151, 154, 160). Bringing together computer-assisted analysis of large bodies of text with a more fine-grained analysis of individual readers' responses is an effective tool to use in exploring or problematising the wider currents of cultural values informing discourse around reading at both private and public levels. It is a method which offers insight into how reading functions as a cultural indicator into wider currents of thought, and which provides examples of the ways individuals readers—both professional and non-professional—use texts to imbue things with value outside the realm of the literary. It is important to note that what the analysis of media texts does not tell us is how the readers of those media texts interpret them. It does however tell us about a powerful aspect of the social frame that these mass reading events are situated within by the media, and some of the meanings that are being persistently attached to reading in a communal context. It is this framing that I want to consider before moving back to the voices of individual readers, who were interviewed in focus groups from 2004 to 2007 about their personal reading habits and their experience of these mass reading events and other literary events.

For those unfamiliar with corpus linguistics as a methodology, a brief introduction may be helpful. Corpus linguistics, or computational linguistics, allows analysts to large amounts of linguistic data with concordancing software which facilitates the identification of broad patterns of language usage that may be difficult to discern through more conventional methods of close textual analysis. Statistical information about individual word frequencies can be obtained, for example, or all instances of a particular word or phrase can be called up and compared, in the form of a KWIC (Key Word in Context) index. Examples of KWIC indexes can be seen in Figures 1 and 3. Although corpus linguistics produces quantitative results, it is important to stress that it does not consist of reducing linguistic complexity to statistics: the quantitative patterns it delivers are meaningless without careful qualitative interpretation of their significance, particularly in relation to the context in which the text occurs. Part of its value lies in its capacity to direct the researcher to individual instances of language use within the corpus which, by being representative or highly prevalent, may merit further attention in the form of close analysis. In the context of a study which seeks to compare cultures of reading across national contexts, it offers further methodological tools for approaching a subject of study to which no single discipline is adequate. The concordancer used in the analysis for this paper is *MonoConc Pro 2.1* [4].

Using corpus linguistics even at a relatively basic level to examine the most frequently occurring lexical (or content) words across a collection of texts can be valuable in giving a sense of the topics covered by those texts. Statistics about the frequencies of particular

words—considered independently of the context in which they appear in the text—cannot by themselves give a nuanced picture of the main topics covered, or how these are treated by writers or speakers [5]. Nonetheless, a provisional picture of thematic concerns can be obtained from word frequencies, which can then be used to direct researchers to specific areas in the corpus on which closer analysis can be carried out. Given that the articles in the three corpora under consideration here address mass reading events, we would expect to find a profusion of terms around books, reading and discussion, and indeed this is what one of the corpora delivers. In the list of the one hundred most frequent terms for the Canada Reads corpus, there are many terms relating to the field of reading: *book, books, reads, library, novel, read, reading, story, author, edition, stories* and *literary*. Where less expected terms appear, however, these often signal discursive patterns that are worth investigating further. In the Big Read frequency list, for example, terms relating to institutions and communities emerge – for example *center, library, program, city, national, public, community, county, museum, school, university, gallery* and *college*. The recurrence of these terms in part reflects the nature of the organising agents and the locations where events were held, but it also indicates that these institutions were of sufficient significance for those writing about the programme to warrant a mention.

### 3.1 Word Frequencies in the Corpora

Examining the most frequently occurring content words in the R&J media texts, we can see that questions of production and cost appear much more prominently here than they do in texts about Canada Reads and The Big Read. In the R&J corpus, the terms *pounds* and *sales* appear in the hundred most frequent words, as do *publishing, publishers* and *published*: three forms of a root word (*publish*) that is absent from the top hundred most frequent words of the other two corpora. Figure 1 gives a sense of the context in which one of these terms (*sales*) occurs.

**Figure 1.** Sample concordance lines for *sales* in the Richard and Judy corpus.

ght books guaranteed a surge in **sales** by getting picked for the Richa  
es in the 2006 Nielsen BookScan **sales** charts were filled by Richard a  
e. After the book was featured, **sales** in Britain began to soar and Pi  
nover. Featured books have seen **sales** jump by 3000 per cent overnight  
nation's favourite in terms of **sales**, it is an accessible novel and

b recommendation, which sparked **sales** of almost 45,000 copies in one  
tured on the Channel 4 show and **sales** rocketed by an astonishing 871  
were looking forward to bumper **sales** today after they were included

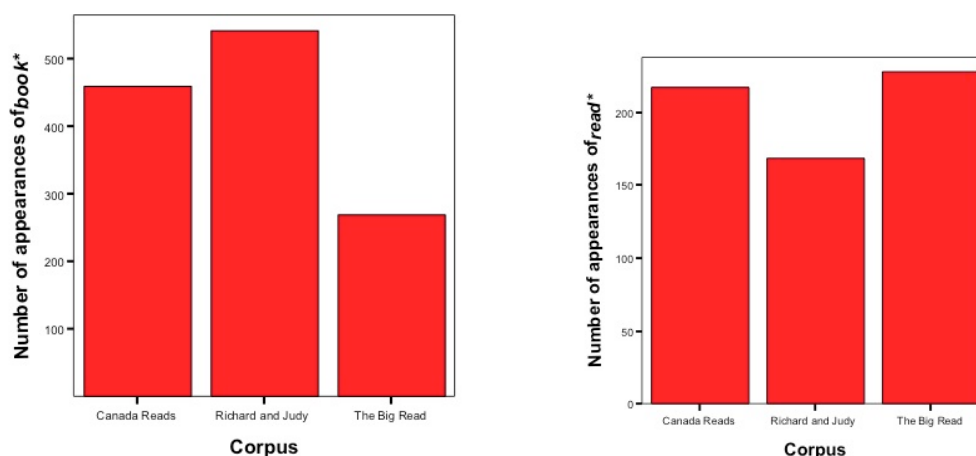
Commentators discussing R&J are also more likely to mention the act of authoring, as the list of the hundred most frequent words includes *author*, *authors* and *writing*. None of these terms or synonyms for the act of authoring appear in the equivalent list for The Big Read, while in Canada Reads only *author* appears. All of these terms relate to structures within book production, distribution and promotion, and suggest more of a preoccupation with the book trade in texts about Richard and Judy as opposed to those about The Big Read or Canada Reads. The words that collocate (or co-occur) frequently with the root word *book* support this interpretation. For R&J commentators, there is a focus on prizes and awards: *prize*, *award*, *whitbread* and *man* [*booker prize*] collocate relatively frequently with the root word *book*, as do *buy*, *independent* [*bookshop/bookseller*], *sales*, *trade*, *industry* and *sold*. In contrast, there is only one such collocate for the root word *book* in the Big Read corpus, and that is only somewhat tangentially related to bookselling (*signing*). The Canada Reads corpus, meanwhile, contains only five (*edition*, *selling*, *winning*, *published*, *sale*). Much attention is thus being paid to the mechanisms of the book trade—and their capacity to bestow value—in the R&J corpus in comparison with the Canada Reads texts, and the contrast is even more pronounced between R&J and The Big Read. What this broad-brush kind of analysis of a large number of media texts suggests, then, is that there is significant emphasis on the commercial aspects of R&J when compared to Canada Reads and The Big Read.

### **3.2 The Book as Object and the Act of Reading**

This emphasis within the R&J texts on the book as an object embedded in relations of production and distribution prompted me to investigate the relative prominence of the root words *book* and *read* across the three corpora. As the graphs in Figure 2 demonstrate, across the three corpora it was the R&J media texts that had the lowest incidence of the root word *read*, and the highest incidence of the root word *book*. These findings suggested that for media commentators, the book as object was much more the focus of Richard and Judy than the act of reading. The act of reading, meanwhile, was more central to the Big Read, and to a somewhat lesser extent Canada Reads, than the book as object. That this was more than a function of the presence of the terms *book* and *read* in the titles of the programmes themselves was supported by other findings. Firstly, as we have seen, there were many terms

connected with the book industry and the commodification of the book in the Richard and Judy frequency list; one of its more prominent root words, *publish*, was absent from the frequency lists of Canada Reads and The Big Read. Secondly, examining the terms co-occurring near the root words *book* and *read* revealed significant patterns in the distribution of positively evaluative language [6]. While commentators on Canada Reads and the Big Read divided their positive evaluations for the two terms evenly, commentators on Richard and Judy were one and a half times more likely to positively evaluate *book\** than they were *read\**. Those discussing R&J thus not only spent more time talking about books relative to those writing about the North American events, but more time framing books in a positive light, compared to the time spent evaluating reading in a positive way. Given the clear sense of scepticism and deprecation arising from the comments at the start of this paper, this is somewhat unexpected.

**Figure 2.** Graphs showing the appearance of forms of the root words *book\** and *read\** in all three corpora (adjusted to compensate for disparities in corpus size).



We might speculate that these findings indicate more of a focus in the R&J texts on books as commodities embedded in circuits of production and distribution, as opposed to the act of reading. Given that the format of all three reading events involve – and indeed promote – discussion of books and the activity of reading more generally, this is unexpected. Moreover, while questions of commerce and profit may not be so much of a concern for The Big Read (many of whose chosen books are written by established authors), they are certainly live



issues for Canada Reads, in which the shortlisted books tend to be recent, and hence authors whose works are selected also benefit from the added exposure and a rise in sales. This finding—that British commentators foregrounded questions of production and commercial value to a much greater extent than did North Americans—was replicated by readers in focus groups [7]. This was not because questions of endorsement and the advantages accruing to publishers were not at stake. Both the Richard and Judy books and the Canada Reads books were sold in bookstores with stickers on their covers linking them to their respective programmes. UK focus group members talked at some length about seeing Richard and Judy stickers on books, and either selecting them or deliberately avoiding the stickered books as a result. Canadian focus group members also noted the presence of Canada Reads-stickered novels in bookstores, but this did not generate much talk about how the presence of promotional stickers affected purchasing choices.

### **3.3 Negative and Positive Evaluation**

As well as this disparity, there was a curious disjunction between the negative opinions expressed by focus group members about Richard and Judy, and the fact that it was the R&J corpus which had by far the largest amount of positive evaluative language around the concepts of books and reading. As we have already seen, a strong sense of positive evaluation accrued around the terms *book* and *read* in all three corpora. It is in fact difficult to find a single negatively evaluative term collocating with either term. It appears to be almost impossible for these news texts to negatively evaluate either the act of reading or the book as object, in spite of the mistrust evinced by many media commentators about the disproportionate influence wielded by Richard and Judy's Book Club over the book trade in the UK (for example Clee, 2006 and Kuper, 2008). This apparent taboo on criticising literacy and literature would bear further exploration with reference corpora, to investigate whether this is evidence of a broader pattern of language use in these nations.

The fact that it was the Richard and Judy corpus which contained the richest selection of positively evaluative terms was all the more unexpected given the effort made by the organisers of The Big Read to emphasise the positive qualities of books and reading, and the fact that no such comparable drive to encourage literary reading was particularly visible within Richard and Judy. It is possible to ascribe this to some degree to the promotional aspect of the show: the presenters were unlikely to say anything negative about the books, given that they and their production team had chosen to support them.

#### **4. Focus Group Interview Data**

##### **4.1 Obscuring Disdain for Richard and Judy's Book Club**

When the corpus findings outlined above are considered in conjunction with focus group data, another possibility arises to explain the patterning around evaluation. Focus group participants in the UK gave very clear interpersonal and behavioural signals of disapproval and disdain towards Richard and Judy: scornful tones of voices, laughter, eye-rolling and so on. In this interpersonal context, it was possible to hear tones of voice and observe body language, and hypothesize that where focus group participants felt unable to explicitly voice their cynicism about Richard and Judy and the profit being made by the show, the publishers and the authors, they were managing to convey this suspicion through comments that did not contain much readily identifiable lexical evidence of negative evaluation. The comments below are two of the more explicit disparagements of the programme:

I think they were – this is going to sound sort of snobby – I think they were fairly 'Richard and Judy' sort of books. And there'll often be one or two sort of interesting ones on the list, but there's obviously some sort of thing of 'We don't want to have anything too weird' or 'We don't want to sort of lose all our viewers' or whatever ... I like stuff that is quirky or challenging or, you know, maybe it is entertaining. But I want to be kind of stretched, and if I'm not being stretched by books I get bored, and I don't think there's enough to talk about as well.

('Selena', Birmingham, UK, January 23, 2007)

I think I heard on the radio about Richard and Judy's thing, and I have caught the tail end of one of the programmes. But I think – and this sounds snobbish as well – but I did look at quite a lot of the books and think no, they're too – they looked [like] books I would consider to be dumbed down and it wasn't my personal choice of fiction. ... I tried [the Richard and Judy Book Club selection] *The Time Traveller's Wife* as well, and I couldn't get into that, but I think I was just reading it at the wrong time because I really would like to read that. But I did feel – it was kind of like very, very popular fiction. That's what I felt about it.

('Amy', Birmingham, UK, January 30, 2007)

Here, criticism of the Richard and Judy choices is mitigated by discursive strategies to compensate for the articulation of taste preferences which are in danger of being perceived as 'snobbish': stressing the subjectivity of one's opinion (*books I would consider to be*

*dumbed down; That's what I felt about it*); forestalling potential criticisms by voicing them oneself (*this is going to sound sort of snobby; this sounds snobbish as well*); countering the negative opinions put forward with some praise (*there'll often be one or two sort of interesting ones on the list; I really would like to read that*). Other focus group participants, when faced with their own or others' expression of doubt about the value of coupling reading to an afternoon television show, persistently shifted the discursive terrain away from the perilous area of taste hierarchies towards the much safer territory of the importance of literacy, praising the programme for promoting books and encouraging non-readers to read:

I think it's hugely successful, in their terms. I mean we don't know what they set out to do. But it works in the show, it's worked as far as the books go. It's got a lot of people talking about books. From another angle I could say it's not successful because it's not broadened the range as much, but I think in what they set out to do – what I would assume they set out to do – they've done it. People keep waiting for the next list. It's an integral part of the show now. So I think from their angle – but I didn't see what their brief was – but from their angle it looks successful.

('Lisa', Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

I think they've introduced books, or certain books, to a much wider audience. My friend, for instance – she watches a lot of television, and up until a few years ago she didn't seem to read much at all. But she picked up that book that you mentioned before, a Richard and Judy, and now she mentions quite often, 'Oh, I've read so and so'. So I think they have introduced to more people, reading books.

('Winnie', Birmingham, UK, March 31, 2007)

As Collins points out, the academy is thoroughly permeated by taste distinctions, but such distinctions are never explicitly signalled but rather tend to be articulated implicitly through educational imperatives that subsume issues of personal taste under questions of social responsibility (Collins, 2002, p. 18). This is illustrated by these two responses, where readers neatly sidestepped the issue of their own tastes and focused instead on questions of education and literacy. Interestingly, Canadian and American readers interviewed in focus groups articulated similar sentiments in relation to Oprah's Book Club:

On the one hand, I have to commend Oprah for encouraging people to read and for bringing, perhaps, some people who would never be heard, or not heard as widely. But on the other hand, I sort of think it's a bit frightening to think of how much power one person has in that sense. You know, how much influence a person has?

('Lucy', Vancouver, Canada, June 11, 2006)

[In response to the question 'What do you think of Oprah's Book Club?'] I think that anything that can get people to read – Oprah's Book Club, Harry Potter for kids – is a good thing.

('Lynne', Seattle, US, May 17, 2007)

The critique in these two responses is submerged. The Vancouver reader shifts the ground of her objection away from the problem of cultural authority in the wrong hands to the much less controversial topic of the concentration of power more generally. The Seattle reader draws an implicit parallel between Oprah's Book Club and another example in which the meeting of popular culture and literature has met with disparagement, the Harry Potter books. Using the words 'for kids' to signal that the Harry Potter books have less prestige than other books, this reader's comment implies that anything – even a populist children's book or a daytime TV show – can be good if it promotes reading. In other responses, readers were more overt in their praise for Oprah, using terms such as 'brilliant' and 'really good':

I can honestly say that I would probably avoid an Oprah book ... I think she's brilliant for doing it, 'cause I think it actually has provoked a lot of people to read. But I have read some of the books she's suggested, but I don't know, I'm not a big Oprah fan and I think it's a bit too mainstream for me.

('Sophie', Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge region, Canada, September 20, 2004)

[In response to the question 'What do you think about Oprah's club in general?'] I think it's been really good to promote reading amongst the general public.

('Caroline', Halifax, Canada, April 27, 2006)

The fact that this pattern of sidestepping the worth of Oprah's or Richard and Judy's Book Club for safer questions around literacy occurs across three national contexts suggests there are two powerful simultaneous drives at work. Firstly, there is the necessity of obscuring one's disdain for the programme, something which may emerge later on from the speaker's comments (*I'm not a big Oprah fan and I think it's a bit too mainstream for me; I would not choose a book just because she had recommended it; it's a bit frightening to think of how much power one person has in that sense*). The comments of the Birmingham readers mentioned earlier suggests this may be out of a concern for not wanting to appear a snob (*this is going to sound sort of snobby; this sounds snobbish as well*). Secondly, to cover over this discursive 'difficulty' of obscured snobbery, the speaker finds something to praise about the programmes. Choosing the 'literacy outreach' aspect of the programmes (rather than, say, the pleasure of discovering new books, the usefulness of bringing recent titles into prominence, or the affective identification enabled by what Turner terms 'para-social'

interactions with celebrities [2004, p. 23]) is doubly efficacious as it not only allows the speaker to evade the problem of articulating views that might be perceived as elitist, but to simultaneously position themselves as outside the realm of those who watch these programmes, and thus implicitly signal their distance from them without appearing to do so. For 'Caroline', the category of 'the general public' to whom Oprah's Book Club is promoting reading is not a group to which she herself appears to belong. These impulses are also visible in the comments of 'Christina', interviewed on February 18, 2006:

I always used to be a bit sniffy about it and think, you know, 'cause it was recommended by Oprah [group laughter] – But actually I think she and Richard and Judy [agreement] have actually done a lot of [agreement] good work in encouraging people to get together and talk about [agreement] books.

This Bristol reader adds a further layer of camouflage to her potential snobbery by framing her implied disparagement of Oprah as something she 'used to' think, and she too distances herself from Oprah's imagined audience by using the term 'people' rather than a term such as 'us' in which she would be included. The fact that there is group laughter when the reader voices her suspicion supports the interpretation that articulating this kind of elitist disdain for Oprah may be a breach of a normative code (see Benwell, 2005, p. 162, 163). Similarly, when this reader does the familiar pivot onto the safer ground of the 'good work' of encouraging reading, there is group agreement: this is safer territory in which the act of positioning oneself above others has been sufficiently submerged as to not present the danger of social discomfort.

#### **4.2 Covert Critiques of Richard and Judy's Book Club**

Another clue that readers' statements about R&J were not to be taken at face value came from a second persistent discursive pattern. Even where readers in focus groups had read the R&J books or watched the show themselves, they repeatedly characterised it as something *for other people* [8]. These other people—from whom focus groups participants implicitly distinguished themselves—were represented as less accomplished readers needing encouragement to read, and as individuals who might not have picked up a book had it not been for this impetus from a television show, the regular watching of which seemed automatically to indicate that they would not be particularly comfortable reading books. Yet, as commentators have repeatedly observed, the texts chosen for R&J are works of literary fiction which make it onto the shortlists of highbrow literary prizes, not the kind of 'easy reads'

that those unaccustomed to reading would be expected to enjoy (see for example Todd, 2006, p. 35-36). Readers' discussions about those who they imagined to be the show's target audience were at odds with the actual target audience, as suggested by the level of complexity and the quality of the books, and this slippage was a further indication that these discussions by focus group participants were less about identifying the features of the R&J audience and more about distinguishing themselves from it. As Bourdieu has observed, cultural objects lend themselves to the fulfilment of an important social function, that of legitimating social differences (1984, p. 7), and this kind of social distinction was amply in evidence here. Very rarely did readers in focus groups cheerfully identify themselves as that target audience, though this may be in part attributable to the fact that some of them were not at home in the afternoons to watch the programme. At least in this interpersonal context, they were more likely to offer subtle or submerged indications that their own reading was higher up the taste scale. In focus groups with Canadian readers, by contrast, a much higher proportion of those in focus groups readily identified themselves as enthusiastic fans of Canada Reads. They did not covertly express their views of the show, or 'code' their critiques in some way.

The focus on the publishing industry and the book trade seen in the media texts was also apparent in focus group discussions, in which Birmingham readers asked insistent questions about the mechanisms of book production and what publishers stood to gain from the publicity given to the books by the show.

It's making the people who already read buy more books, isn't it? Or buy the right books, books they want you to buy.

('Rebecca', Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

Publishers love it really because it's – I mean has all the increase in sales. And the huge support they must get from the publishers now ... If you get a book on Richard and Judy then you're made.

('Phoebe', Birmingham, UK, March 27, 2007)

Asked what she thought the programme's book club was designed to achieve, one focus group member replied:

Just to sell books. And Richard and Judy. ... I think it's to get the country buying, because how many people, I wonder, have not got through some of these books, and they bought them because they were recommended.

('Alice', Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

In light of these articulations from focus groups, it seems plausible that the overwhelming patterning of positive evaluation around books and reading in the Richard and Judy media texts might be working in the same way. It seemed to be acting as a compensatory mechanism for expressing taste preferences that suggested a sense of social superiority, and as a discursive tactic to move from a fraught issue to something that can be easily agreed on: that reading is a social good. What is suggested by these discursive strategies employed to get around the problem of navigating the tension involved in the meshing of a low-culture medium (television) with a high-culture medium (books) without expressing socially inappropriate elitist viewpoints is that reading is itself something that it is taboo to criticise. Even when linked to a medium which it is acceptable to portray as low-culture (as those in focus groups willingly did), reading retains an aura of critique-proof 'invincibility', and necessitates the kind of linguistic manoeuvring from discussants that I have sketched above.

### **5. Differences between Canada Reads, The Big Read and Richard and Judy's Book Club**

Another question which arises from these findings is why Canada Reads – also disseminated via the mass media, on the radio – does not have the same stigma attached to it as R&J. This is in part attributable to the fact that radio and television are situated in different ways within the cultural field, and also that, as the national broadcaster, the CBC has more cultural authority than a commercial station such as C4 TV in Canada which is the approximate equivalent of Channel 4, the UK channel which hosts Richard and Judy. Looking at the media texts, I hypothesised that a further contributing factor is the way Canada Reads is strongly linked—in both its own self-presentation on the CBC website and in the content of the celebrity debates—to broader social benefits. In the Canada Reads media texts, there is also a discernable emphasis on nation and region. Many different forms of the root word *Canada* collocated with the root words *book* and *read*. Some of these can be explained by the search string used to obtain the articles through Nexis (ie. *Canada Reads*), but not all (for example *canadian* and *canadians*). One interpretation of this data is that the kind of 'work' Canada Reads is seen to be performing is cultural and discussive: using books in a sense-making capacity to work through questions of national and regional identity and history. This is supported by data from an online survey carried out in April-May 2006 which surveyed over nine hundred readers about their reading habits and Canada Reads. Asked the question 'What type of book is the best choice for Canada Reads? Why?', many of the participants invoked nationalism in their responses:

Ideally, one which is written by a Canadian or is about Canadian subject matter. Canada has a million wonderful untold stories. We aren't 'rah-rah patriots' but we share a common history.

One that tells a Canadian story, that represents the diverse experiences of Canadians and that of course, is engaging.

A novel by an obscure Canadian author. It's invaluable for Canadians to be reading works by Canadian authors, especially because we're so inundated by American pop culture. In reading Canadian works, we recognize ourselves, our culture, our land, our experiences, and we gain a deeper appreciation for our differences from and similarities to Americans and all people. I say obscure because the more prominent authors are generally (sort of) covered in the public school curriculum.

In The Big Read's self-presentation (as seen on its website and in NEA press releases) and media texts, meanwhile, reading was also linked to broader beneficial activities, most notably the strengthening of community bonds. Whereas the Big Read corpus contained 128 instances of the root word *community*, Canada Reads contained only thirty-five and Richard and Judy only three. Figure 3 gives some examples of how the term was used in The Big Read media texts. There was also more regularity to the collocate patterning for the root word *community*, suggesting that there were more established phrases and ways of talking about the concept of community in the context of the Big Read than for the other two reading events.

**Figure 3.** Sample concordance lines for the root word *community* in The Big Read corpus.

realize that libraries build **communities** as much as communities build  
the joys of literature. In 72 **communities** across the United States, p  
th the excellent idea to get **communities** to read together. Stillwate  
nd the Big Read, the largest **community** reading program in the United  
he Big Read is next week The **community** can participate May 3 and 4 i  
sic books and participate in **community** events and discussions. In gr  
ching grant to encourage the **community** to open a book together. Last  
'pleasure, enlightenment and **community**-building,' Wood said. Informa

## 6. Conclusions



I have set out here just a few of the discursive strategies which readers and media commentators used to express their taste preferences about R&J, and how these differ from those used to discuss other nationwide reading events. We have seen how terms connected with prizes and awards recurred in the Richard and Judy media texts, suggesting a persistent pattern whereby books were imbued with value not according to a standard of literary value, but based on an award or prize. These findings can also be interpreted as evidence of anxiety that the process of valuing and potentially canonising books is being done by a daytime television programme seen as popular and lowbrow. As these comments from a Birmingham reader illustrate, there is suspicion about the show's producer (Amanda Ross) and whether she has the authority to decide on the books for the programme:

... The woman that picks the books said that she wasn't a great reader, in terms of reading lots of different things, so that did make me wonder. ... I can't remember who that was, I just remember reading it in the *Guardian*. Probably. It was a big article probably about a year ago ... she was talking about how she picks the books. And I think that's where my cynicism came from – because it was probably a bit underlying, and then I read this and just went 'Well!'  
(‘Lisa’, Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

The Big Read books were already established classics, and therefore there was no need to negotiate their value. The Canada Reads books mostly come from the domain of contemporary literary fiction, but as focus group data revealed, the CBC is trusted as a reputable cultural authority, and many of the books chosen were already canonical works of Canadian literature (for example Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*) or were written by established authors (Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Mordecai Richler, among others). Richard and Judy and Channel 4, however, have no such cultural authority, and are instead associated with a high level of marketing on the high street and in the media, which is possibly why the anxiety around the dissemination and promotion of potentially unworthy texts emerged in the overemphasis on money and the commercial machinations behind the show. What appears to be at least partially responsible for driving these submerged discourses of taste are anxieties about a TV programme being over-influential in determining value and canons. While the CBC and the NEA are trusted to put forth reputable book choices, a commercial TV channel is not.

Reinforcing this dynamic are the cultural meanings that attach to Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan who, as daytime television celebrities, are associated with other elements from popular culture, such as the B-list celebrities who appear as guests on their show. Observing that reading is always 'overprinted by a relationship of forces' such as those between

teachers and pupils, or producers and consumers, Michel de Certeau argues that privileged interpreters make their readings into the only legitimate interpretations, designating other readings as heretical or insignificant. The meaning of texts can thus be seen as the index and the result of social power. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that bringing reading together with a daytime television programme generates anxieties of the sort articulated by the readers here. De Certeau points out that it is the semiotic flexibility of texts that enables them to function so effectively as arbiters of social value: 'By its very nature available to a plural reading, the text becomes a cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve, the pretext for a law that legitimizes as 'literal' the interpretation given by *socially* authorized professionals and intellectuals' (1984, p. 171, italics in original). When those responsible for legitimising texts such as Richard and Judy are not socially authorized professionals, the texts are assumed to themselves be of lower quality. It was thus necessary for readers in focus groups to register surprise when discovering that the quality of the R&J books was higher than they had expected:

I was surprised that *The Shadow of the Wind* was one of their selections, because that is quite dense and quite convoluted. I mean, it's terribly rewarding but it's – that really did surprise me. I didn't know it was one of theirs when I read it, and I was quite surprised at that.

('Fiona', Birmingham, UK, February 6, 2007)

Probably I'd kind of go [gasps] 'Richard and Judy?' and possibly I would turn my nose a bit. However, I think I'm wrong to do that, because I've seen lots of stickers on books in bookshops that have been like really quite decent books ... And I know I've read articles in the paper that, you know, that actually a lot of the books are ... really quite good books.

('Jenny', Liverpool, UK, February 21, 2007)

In the first responses we see 'dense' and 'convoluted' texts being implicitly hierarchised over the putative typical Richard and Judy book, while in the second response 'articles in the paper' are deemed more reliable judges of literary calibre than R&J. Even while praising the show's book choices, then, readers continue to classify R&J itself as something low on the taste scale, as if no number of high-quality literary texts can rescue it from its position of low prestige.

These responses also illustrate Bourdieu's point that in order to understand an individual's relationship to a cultural object such as a book, it is necessary to take into account the interrelations of other cultural items and individuals' 'position-takings' in relation to them. Even

when a choice of position stays the same, changes in the array of options open to producers and consumers means that the meaning of a literary work automatically changes automatically 'with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader' (1983, p. 313). The rising influence of R&J in the arena of book production and consumption, and the responses to it considered here suggest that it is a particularly significant change within the cultural field, particularly for the realm of cultural tastes. For the readers and media commentators considered here, I contend that the changes in position-taking register in the form of the disavowals and distancings that I have identified in individual readers and media commentators.

What the readers quoted in this paper also appear to be objecting to is the illegitimacy of the symbolic power R&J arrogates to itself in determining the reading choices made by so many across the nation. Bourdieu sets out the logic of symbolic power and its dependence on the accrual of symbolic capital, which, as the 'power to impose upon other minds a vision, old or new, of social divisions', depends on the authority already acquired (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). As figures associated not just with television but with the even more maligned realm of daytime television, Richard Madeley, Judy Finnegan and the show's producer Amanda Ross are clearly perceived to be lacking 'the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition' (ibid.). That this short-circuiting of the usual operations of cultural capital has been brought about by the forces of commerce is another reason for readers to mistrust their operation in the literary realm.

What is also significant is the different ways in which taste preferences were articulated in the media texts when compared to the interpersonal discussions within focus groups. Focus group participants expressed scorn about Richard and Judy and suspicion about the hidden processes operating to select the books not so much through the substantive content of their utterances as through their behaviour and gestures. I expected to find the equivalent stance in the news texts, but this time conveyed lexically due to the absence of interpersonal and behavioural resources. However, negative evaluation was conveyed not by overtly evaluative language, but instead more subtly, by a profusion of terms associated with structures of production such as publishing, publicity and retail. These two types of data thus complemented each other, with the focus groups suggesting a way to interpret this persistent discourse about mechanisms of the book trade. If journalists and focus group members were both highly reticent to cast reading in a negative light, then negative evaluation of books and reading in the context of a magazine-style television show was, I have hypothesised, sufficiently fraught as to need to be coded by reference to discussion of other things such as structures of book production and promotion. Without the focus group data, it would be difficult to make this connection from the corpus data alone. Without the corpus data, however, it would be difficult to identify (from the relatively small amounts of focus group transcript text)

isolated instances of discussion of structures of book production as part of a broader discursive strategy aimed at discrediting R&J without appearing to negatively evaluate books and reading.

These findings suggest that book consumption in the age of media convergence needs to be reconsidered, given the considerable resistance exhibited by the readers and commentators here to the apparent devaluing of books by association with a daytime television programme and a high degree of commodification and branding. Far from breaking down the boundaries between high and low culture, the developments in this particular corner of the field of cultural production suggests that the distinction between books and television as cultural objects continues to be strongly felt, even if those strong feelings are articulated in covert ways in order to avoid the charge of elitism.

Part of what is significant about the discourse around Richard & Judy's Book Club is that it reproduces many of the anxieties which Janice Radway identifies as occurring some 70-80 years earlier in relation to another institution which coupled literary culture to book distribution on a mass scale, the Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States. Radway cites as an example a 1925 article in the *New Republic* which epitomizes anxieties over the threat to literary culture brought about by efforts to make works of literature available to a wider group of people than the educated elite (Radway, 1997, p. 213). Distinguishing 'real' literature – 'the effect of creative thought and of creative vision' from those 'false' commodities aimed at 'the mob' and 'the mass' (Frank, 1925, p. 46), this article exemplifies the conceptual opposition between high culture and a system of mass production and distribution whose legacy persists today in the discourse around Richard and Judy's Book Club. As Radway shows, by bringing into visibility the machinery of production and distribution of books and thus foregrounding their existence as commodities, the Book-of-the-Month Club undermined literature's potential for transcendence by 'absorb[ing] both readers and writers into a vast, integrated system for the circulation of cultural commodities' (p. 217). Another interesting point of comparison provided by Radway's study is that critics of the Book-of-the-Month Club were more open with their objection to the middlebrow nature of the club, without needing to have recourse to the kind of coded and covert criticisms that I have identified here. Twenty-first century critics and readers are, it appears, less willing than their mid-twentieth century counterparts to denigrate a book club which has found commercial success using explicitly classed terms, or with specific reference to the category of high culture.

We are familiar with Bourdieu's observations that within the literary field the principles of ordinary economies are systematically inverted: a work's authenticity and high quality is signalled by its lack of value in the marketplace (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 320, 321). In a similar vein, Hamilton argues that one reason for the success of online booksellers is that they allow

the economic aspect of the transaction of book purchasing to be pushed to the edges of the experience while other elements relating to taste and individual preference—reviews, chat, similar titles—are foregrounded. This is epitomised by Amazon’s one-click purchase option, which illustrates that even in ‘consumer cyberspace’s multiple networks of exchange and production high culture needs to remain an island untouched by the commercial’ (2004). This study provides another angle on the relationship between the book and the market, as we have seen readers exhibit a kind of disavowal over the status of books as commodities rather than symbolic objects representing information about one’s identity and social position. Readers are resistant to the idea that books are commodities freely available on the high street which anyone can purchase, and in the discursive patterns outlined above they demonstrate some of the strategies for resisting this ‘cheapening’. Indeed, the reader from whose comment the title of this paper is drawn made a point of drawing attention to the fact that she had acquired a Richard and Judy book secondhand rather than paying full price to obtain it through the usual circuits through which books are purchased. The economic value of books thus seems to disrupt their symbolic value, something vital to the conceptualisation of one’s tastes and identity as a reader: if a book can be purchased by anyone then it becomes a much less reliable signifier of social position. Bringing something powerfully associated with popular culture—television—into the equation increases reader resistance still further. Richard and Judy’s Book Club illustrates how, in an age of increasing media convergence, books and television are impinging on each others’ realms, but also how persistent taste hierarchies and existing logics of symbolic capital continue to influence our response to them in powerful and not always obvious ways.

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### Notes

[1] In 2004, for example, a survey by *Publishing News* reported that 1.8 million people had picked up Richard and Judy books as a result of being featured on the programme (Bennett, 2004).

[2] The study to which Dana Gioia refers in this press release is Bradshaw and Nichols, 2004.

[3] Nexis (formerly LexisNexis) is a full-text database of the world's English language press from 1975 to the present day, which includes content from 'over 2,000 global newspapers, 750 newswires and over 7,000 licensed newsletters, journals and industry titles'. URL <http://www.lexisnexis.org.uk/nexis/news/> [visited 23/11/09].

[4] A good first port of call for scholars who are not specialists in corpus linguistics but who would like to use it in their research is Baker, who sets out some of the limitations of corpus methodologies and the importance of contextualising the texts that make up the corpora (2006: 18, 25). Aston and Burnard (1998) offer a short introduction to the field of corpus linguistics in addition to detailed instructions and exercises explaining how to explore one corpus, the British National Corpus, using the software interface SARA. Two further useful introductory texts are McEnery and Wilson (1996) and Stubbs (1996).

[5] Media reports such as reviews have been used as the basis for reception research, for example in Janet Staiger's work on contemporary films (1993) and Kenneth Roemer's research on nineteenth-century reviewers of utopian literature (2008). The corpus of media texts considered here is different, however, not only because of its considerably larger size but also because some of its constituent texts exhibit considerable similarities and are likely to have been generated from similar materials such as press releases or the websites of

publishers or the television show itself. Such media reports are thus less a response to the 'primary text' of Richard and Judy's Book Club than they are a gloss on a 'secondary text' such as a press release.

[6] I have followed Thompson and Hunston's definition of evaluation: 'the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about' (Thompson and Hunston, 2000, p. 5).

[7] Focus groups were recruited as part of the AHRC-funded project *Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the UK, US and Canada*. I am grateful to my colleagues Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo for allowing me to use our focus group transcripts and responses from our online questionnaires. The focus groups referred to in this paper took place in Bristol, Birmingham, and Liverpool (UK), Seattle (US) and Vancouver, Halifax, and the region around the towns of Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge in southern Ontario (Canada) from 2004 to 2007. Participants for both the focus groups and the online questionnaires were recruited by locally-based fieldworkers who placed advertisements in different places around each city in places such as bookstores, libraries and community centres. These advertisements targeted those who self-identified as readers, and who had had some involvement with particular mass reading events linked either to the city or to the country as a whole such as Bristol's Great Reading Adventure, Richard and Judy's Book Club, Liverpool Reads, Seattle Reads, One Book One Vancouver, Canada Reads, and One Book One Community (in the Kitchener/Waterloo/Cambridge region). An average of six focus groups were carried out in each of the different locations. Each was ninety minutes in length, was moderated by two of the three researchers, and most were made up of around four to eight participants.

[8] In the examples cited in this paper, for example, 'Caroline' uses the category 'general public' and Christina refers to 'people' – both clearly marking themselves as not really belonging to these 'groups' (although grammatically they might seem to).

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