

Book blogs as tastemakers

Beth Driscoll,
University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract:

Amidst the abundant opportunities for book chat provided by digital media platforms, the book blog is distinctive; less obviously corporatised than Amazon, Facebook or Twitter, longer in format, and focused around the tastes of an individual and the community of like-minded readers they attract (Rak 2005, Steiner 2010). Book blogs model how to read, as well as what to read. In this article, I consider book blogs as shared expressions of readers' aesthetic conduct, which may encompass a variety of tastes. I map two contrasting networks of blogs: highbrow literary blogs, and romance fiction blogs. Both networks demonstrate connections to the publishing industry, while also maintaining an autonomy based on readers offering authentic opinions as a service to other readers. Analysis of book blogs shows that while new media does enable mass participation of readers in book culture, this participation can be stratified into taste-based groups, which are themselves further stratified by a hierarchy in which bloggers accumulate a specific kind of 'readerly capital' evident in their influence on other readers. Book blogs, like other forms of participation in literary culture, work within genres and taste cultures to create a diversified cultural space.

Keywords: book blogs; readers; publishing; creative industries; taste; romance fiction

Introduction

Blogs are one of the older 'new media' formats used by readers to discuss books online. Their heyday, in terms of public interest, was in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and as attention shifts to social media platforms, blogs may appear as relics of an older internet age. Yet book blogs remain intriguing sites of book talk; even as they spill across multiple platforms and become integrated into a complex online cultural space, book blogs retain their distinctive shape. They are sites of personal cultural expression, less obviously corporatised than Amazon, Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, longer in format, and focused around the tastes of an individual or small group and the community of like-minded readers they attract. As research objects, book blogs offer evidence of the articulation of reading as

aesthetic conduct and of online tastemaking processes. In this article, I describe how book blogs operate as sites of readerly expression, and go on to analyse two taste-based networks of book blogs: serious, highbrow literary blogs, and romance fiction blogs.

Blogs, Mass Participation and Professionalisation

Blogs began in the mid-1990s, not long after the appearance of the World Wide Web itself, and surged in popularity after the 1999 launch of the website Blogger, which made blogging more accessible and cemented key formatting features such as reverse chronological display and the blogroll, a list of the bloggers' favourite links including other blogs. The term blog itself was coined in 1997 as an abbreviation of 'web log' and, as Julie Rak argues, blogs are best understood as a genre descended from both early online diaries, and the crude lists of links that circulated before the age of search engines (2005). This is a distinctive combination, drawing together the provision of useful information and personal expression. Blogs are a form of what Jill Rettberg Walker terms 'digital self-representation'; textual self-representation, such as that found in blog posts, was one of the first forms of this, and has rapidly been followed by visual and quantitative self-representations, such as selfies and fitness trackers (2014, 3). The alignment of blogs with text makes it a particularly synergistic site for engagement with books.

As user-generated media, blogs were part of the first wave of online democratisation of the public sphere (Bruns 2008). The potential for blogs to introduce new voices into public discussion was part of the excitement around their emergence, particularly for political and journalistic blogs (Goode 2009, Bruns et al 2012). One oft-cited example is Salam Pax, the pseudonymous 'Baghdad Blogger' who wrote about the Iraq war from the perspective of an Iraqi citizen (Pax 2003). This democratisation had limitations: while in theory anyone can start a blog, there is, for example, evidence of a 'class-based digital production gap' (Schradié 2013), indicating that pre-existing social inequalities persist online. Further, the line between grassroots expression and professional media has progressively blurred, as some blogs became absorbed into existing power structures by affiliating with media organisations, and these organisations also launched their own blogs (Singer 2005, Garden 2010).

In the cultural (rather than explicitly political or journalistic) sphere, blogs were early identified as an important digital expression of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006). Henry Jenkins's discussion of fan-run blogs, predominantly related to areas of film, TV and games, charts their evolution into important components of the creative industries; blogs are one of the ways in which fans 'have become central to how culture operates' (2006, 1). Jenkins argues that there is no simple relation, either top down or bottom up, between fan behaviour and media companies; bloggers sometimes collaborate with corporate interests, but also increase diversity, make corporations more responsive and so on, becoming 'grassroots intermediaries' of the cultural industries (2006, 151).

Book blogs, as a sphere within cultural blogging, show a similarly complex relationship with industry. Early book blogger Stephen Mitchelmore, for example, still runs

his site This Space as an individual, but there are also book blogs affiliated with publishers, libraries, writers centres, festivals, and other professional literary organisations, as well as educational institutions (see Gomez 2005, Kuzyk 2006, Storie 2007, West 2011, Foasberg 2012, Sutton and Paulfeuerborn 2014). Personal book blogs can launch professional careers in the book industry; for example, by showcasing new writing that goes on to find mainstream publication. Hoda Elsadda has written about three women whose blogs were part of an online counterpublic in the Arab world in the early 2000s, and whose short stories were picked up by trade publishers (2010).

Professionalization is also a feature of the blogs focused on reading. One young Australian book blogger recently wrote about her trajectory: soon after starting a book blog at the age of 14, Sarah Robinson-Hatch met a like-minded bookseller and Youtuber, and they jointly launched a Young Adult Book Club (2018). At only 19, Robinson-Hatch describes her immersion in professional book culture:

Running a book club is almost like a full-time job: there's promoting, interacting with readers, organising events, making content and communicating with authors and publishers. And that's all on top of running my own blog and finding time to write for my own enjoyment, as well as working two part-time jobs, interning at Writers Victoria and Melbourne Writers Festival and completing a Bachelor of Professional Communications. It's a lot of work. (Robinson-Hatch, 2018)

As this account shows, becoming a professional in the book industry is about paid activities, but it is also more than that – the process of professionalisation involves claiming expertise and affiliation with organisations. In this, the book industry resembles other creative sectors. Deuze and Lewis argue that the creative and cultural industries are increasingly precarious and de-centralised, and '[t]he responsibility for articulating, developing, maintaining and enacting professional identity thus comes to rest solely on the shoulders of individual workers' (2014, 164). Self-identification as a professional is affected by the degree to which participants see themselves as doing cultural work, a form of subjectivity that is influenced by peer group and organizational affiliations, as well as by remuneration.

This mixed model of professionalism is also evident in the Swedish book blog Bokhara, analysed by Ann Steiner (2010). The five women who run Bokhara 'are presented in styled press photos as smart, good-looking, intelligent middle-class women,' who appear at book fairs, edit special issues of journals, sell advertising space, and participate in numerous other paid activities associated with their blog. Steiner concludes that 'There are plenty of examples of how they are no longer amateurs, and it is possible to argue that their professionalism lies, among other things, in being able to read and write like 'anybody,' something that perhaps traditional criticism has failed to do' (Steiner 2010, 484-5). Even the amateurism of blogs has commercial value, and even those blogs that are not obviously professionalised draw attention to books (most often new releases) and contribute to word-

of-mouth marketing. Book bloggers are incontrovertibly part of the publishing industry (Murray 2018, 71), as well as what Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo call the 'reading industry', a formation that includes government and arts organisations (2013, 18). As a result, book blogging can provide pathways to, and more or less explicit articulations of, professionalism; yet this is often uneven or unstable, and may be paired with declarations of amateurism or distance from industry.

Book blogs' enmeshment in industry sits alongside their specifically cultural functions: book blogs are tastemakers, via the expression of individual and group taste cultures. Just as book blogs take up a range of (overlapping, shifting, mobile) positions between amateur and professionalised, they also inhabit a range of taste cultures, from the diverse genres of mass market fiction through to highbrow literature. Book blogging, that is, is not simply a forum for the expression of popular taste by ordinary readers, but in many ways reflects or offers a version of established cultural hierarchies and positions.

Blogs as Life Writing

One of the features of blogging is the greater personal control it allows, compared to other social media. Blogs offer readers fewer restrictions in how they present their book talk: blog posts can be written to any length (not constricted to, say 280 characters as on Twitter), are not organised by the forced ratings and implicit review format of Amazon and Goodreads, and are less susceptible to algorithmic manipulation than posts on Instagram or Facebook. For many book bloggers, maintaining a blog as their base and supplementing it with social media posts gives them creative control.

An affinity with liberalism and freedom of expression is embedded in the history and current practice of blogging. Rak writes that 'blogs participated in the early ideology of the web as a non-corporate public space for individual expression' (2005, 171) and argues that 'most blogs still have the opinions and experiences of a single person as their focus' (2005, 172). Blogs, that is, are a deeply personal form of writing. They have been studied as forms of diary, or life writing (Hookway 2008, Rettberg 2014, Serfaty 2004). José van Dijck writes that both diary writing and blogging are 'cultural practices – quotidian habits or daily rituals which gradually receive a place in a person's life' (2004, n.p.), and that 'like the writing of paper diaries, blogging is a process that helps express and order thoughts through rituals, thus defining a sense of self in relation to others' (2004, n.p.). Blogs, seen this way, are identity-formation tools, and presentations of selves.

Importantly, the blog is a form of personal writing that is shared with others. As Philip Lejeune, a theorist of diaries, writes, blogs erase some of the distinctions between personal and public writing:

It seems clear that the Internet and blogs are reshuffling the cards, erasing some distinctions that we thought were set in stone when in fact they were the projections of short-lived communication tools. The blog, for example,

eliminates the distinction between diary and correspondence, and also between public and private. (Lejeune, 2013, 249)

For van Dijck, too, 'Bloggers are retooling the practice of diary writing, meanwhile creating a new type of cultural knowledge and social interaction via their tools' (2004, n.p.). Blogs are part of the personalisation of the public sphere. Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd analyse blogs as 'social action' that is typically both a form of self-expression and an act of community building (2004, 9). For Lejeune, the proliferation of blogs is part of 'a new type of sociability [that] has sprung up. People have a blog, a website, or a Facebook page; they 'tweet' the way people used to leave a calling card: it is the minimal and almost obligatory way of existing socially.' (Lejeune 2014, 253). His analysis of blogs leads him to theorise what he called 'network intimacy': 'Technology had made it possible to reconfigure relationships, giving rise to a new type of friendship between strangers – people who recognized and gravitated towards one another because of their diaries' (Lejeune, 2014, 252).

This conceptualisation is true for book blogs as much as it is for more obviously diaristic blogs. As Steiner notes, 'Even though a book blog is about literature, the personalized tone is necessary to attract readers. A de-personalized blogger without passions leaves no impression, and tends to have few visitors' (2010, 488).

Blogs as Aesthetic Conduct

One way to think about the connections between blogs, life writing and books is through an extension of the notion of reading as aesthetic conduct. I take this term from Marielle Macé's essay 'Ways of Reading, Modes of Being' (2013), although I want to develop it in a slightly different direction. For Macé, reading is aesthetic conduct, in the sense that it involves following a path set out by a book; when we read, we 'find ourselves powerfully drawn towards different possibilities and promises of existence' (2013, 213). For Macé, reading literature is a profoundly individuating activity, allowing the reader to construct a 'stylistics of existence,' a way of being in the world. As she writes, 'Reading is not a separate activity, functioning in competition with life, but one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavour, even style' (2013, 213). This sentence is quoted by Rita Felski in her book *The Limits of Critique* (2015, 175), where she also refers to Macé's writing about how snatches of the books we read make their way into our daily lives. As Jean-Francois Hamel has argued, this view of reading is part of a 'pragmatist turn' in literary studies that emphasises connections between art and experience (2015, para 3).

However, it is also focused very much on the private act and experience of reading. As Hamel puts it,

The reader envisioned by Marielle Macé is 'hungry for intimacy and self-esteem' as if literary texts were never more than a pretext to withdraw from public space to test one's own style...The individuation generated by the

literary experience is strictly individual: neither upstream nor downstream of the reading is elaborated...of shared practice of the texts, of community of attention and interpretation. (2015, para 5)

Hamel emphasises the link between individual and community; this insight can be extended to consider how reading produces a series of different groups, as well as the relations between them. Despite the universal 'we' of Macé's essay, there is a multiplicity of contrasting, interacting reading formations. I want to extend Mace's useful idea of reading as conduct into social discussions of reading; to look at the paths traced by readers who share their (personal, individual) reading experiences with others.

Book blogs, as sites where reading is discussed, display aesthetic conduct. They present modes of talking about books (literary discourse) and connecting with other readers (literary sociability). They do so in a way that blends the personal qualities of diary writing with public-facing address. As van Dijck points out, 'quotidian acts such as diary writing' are 'ways of constructing life' (2004, n.p.), and the nature of this activity is changed when diaries move online: 'individuality and collectivity are redefined in the face of a culture that values sharing. Weblog architecture ... favours a connected exploration of the personal' (2004, n.p.). Book blogs model reading as aesthetic conduct, taking the private experience of reading and transforming it into shared acts of communication with other readers.

Book Blogs and Taste

A central component of book blogging as aesthetic conduct is the performance (or articulation) of taste. Taste is a complicated concept. In *Understanding Cultural Taste* (2015), David Wright defines taste as three things: a sensation, a sensibility and a skill. That is, taste is one of our primary sensory experiences of the world, as well as 'an orientation towards and away from the things, and, importantly, people' in the material world, and 'a capacity that can be cultivated as people learn how to make judgements and choices within and between these things and people' (2015, 5). Already we can intimate how central taste is to book blogs, which record an experience with a book, are often shaped to reflect orientation towards specific kinds of books, and allow bloggers as readers to hone their expertise in relation to those books. And, as Wright also notes, aspects of taste are heightened online; many digital technologies 'attempt to capture the affective, sensory aspects of tasting and transform the act of *liking* such that taste becomes even more loaded in contemporary strategies of measuring and managing social life' (2015, 8). This is most obvious, perhaps, in the hearts, thumbs up, and star ratings encouraged on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Amazon, but the effects ripple across digital culture. Digital technologies 'raise distinct questions about the contemporary *experience* of tasting, not least because the language of liking, disliking and sharing is so ubiquitous online and because the *stuff* of taste – music, films, television and books – is a significant part of how these digital media technologies are lived with and used.' (2015, 145)

Three other observations about taste made by Wright are highly relevant to book blogs. First, he notes that the way in which taste is perceived as *personal* is linked to the individualised subject of neoliberal capitalism; ‘Taste is often, today, a synonym for consumer choice and preference’ (2015, 2). Curated displays of taste, such as those on many book blogs, are examples of ‘well-conducted consumerist expertise’ (2015, 2). This links back to the idea that blogs are integrated into the commerce of the publishing industry; the books discussed by readers on blogs are products, and the discussions of those books are reflections on purchasing decisions, often including a recommendation (or not) for others to purchase.

Second, taste has a moral element. As Wright notes, there is a historical relationship with the senses and morality (2015, 2). Taste is linked to morality because both carry a sense of doing the right thing, or making the right choice. It is therefore possible for some tastes in books to be (at least implicitly) immoral; to be examples of enjoying the wrong thing. If a reader feels judged in this way, they may express their taste for particular kinds of books defensively, for example by positioning their reading as a guilty pleasure. Finally, taste may be perceived and presented as a matter of personal preference, but it is also ‘socially patterned’ (2015, 2). Sociologists have studied the correlation between social structures and cultural tastes intensively; the key work here is Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, with its famous dictum that ‘Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (1984, 6). That is, the act of expressing cultural taste marks out a person’s position in social structures. Large scale research projects have surveyed populations to investigate correlations between demographics attributes and cultural tastes (see, for example, Bennett, Emmison and Frow, 1999). The social positioning effects of taste are also present, and in many cases amplified, online. For example, the Australian Cultural Fields research project included as a dissemination strategy an online quiz, where participants could answer questions about their tastes in music, books and television, and receive an assessment of their likely demographics (Ting et al, 2018): my results announced that ‘Your cultural tastes are most similar to a middle class woman, aged 40-59 with a postgraduate education’ ... but the fact that you read and liked Stephen King aligns your tastes more closely to the working class.’ This quiz relied on simplified and fairly rigid categories that were criticised in public discussion (see, for example, Stuart 2018). This is a familiar objection to Bourdieusian research, and the limitations of demographic analyses of taste should be borne in mind. Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s key point that expressions of cultural taste communicate aspects of a person’s social position seems uncontroversial. In the world of books, obscure tastes can align a reader with the avant-garde; for mass market popular fiction, expressions of taste also serve a function, as specific preferences bring together communities of like-minded readers.

Book Blogs as Tastemakers

In this world of online expressions of taste, book blogs can become tastemakers. The public performance of reading as aesthetic conduct can produce what I have elsewhere called

‘readerly capital’, a kind of resource or asset that attests to someone’s authority as a reader, and which situates them in a hierarchical reading community or network (Driscoll 2016). As a subset of cultural capital, readerly capital in the twenty-first century includes the proficient use of the protocols of digital literary culture to signify knowledge and expertise; for example, by amassing ‘likes’ and ‘follows’, or writing an online review that links extensively to other works in a subgenre. Readerly capital enables readers to take up positions of influence in the field. This is a version of the tastemaking performed by other readers and institutions. As Wright observes,

the culture of online reviewing, and the processes of incorporating reviews from peers into the processes of choosing and liking cultural products, are a clear continuation with the past, in which debates about trust, authority, reliability and who gets to decide what is good or bad, tasteful or not in the cultural realm are played out in new contexts. (2015, 161)

The line between old and new forms of tastemaking is porous, as evidenced by the link between many book blogs and established literary institutions. Yet book bloggers without links to official institutions constitute a new position in the literary field; their form of cultural authority is born-digital, and thus expands the literary sphere (Murray 2015, 321). The specific nature of this authority is linked to the way blogs are networked. Blogs are comprehensively connected to, and spread ideas across, multiple online (and often print) platforms; at the same time, most blogs address relatively coherent groups of readers. As Rak writes, ‘blogs create a specific type of social space, and are constructed to attract specific types of community based on similarity rather than differences’ (2005, 176). John Frow, too, describes the blog as a genre directed at small audiences of like-minded readers (2006, 156). The book blog is not, in this way, a ‘mass’ medium, despite its public visibility, but rather one directed at building a community based on similar tastes. It is through addressing this homogenous audience that bloggers accrue authority and shape taste cultures within the digital literary sphere.

This description recognises that book bloggers can express tastes taken from a wide range of possibilities; they may choose to focus on poetry, or science fiction, or any other kind of writing. Just as there is no clear line between older and newer forms of tastemaking, there is no neat demarcation between the kinds of literary taste expressed online and those that are expressed in print. Instead, there are overlaps and entanglements. In the analysis of blogs that follows, I demonstrate that the entire cultural hierarchy is replicated online, inflected by the affordances of blogs. This investigation thus counters any reductive equation that links online with amateur criticism and popular books; and print with professional gatekeepers and literary fiction. Book blogs are as diverse, and as complexly structured, as literary culture itself.

Clustering Book Blogs

The second half of this article is an empirical analysis of different book blog taste cultures. As scholars have noted, the sheer quantity of blogs makes them difficult to study (Lejeune 2014, Murray 2015). Rather than abandoning the task, however, I have made a beginning by identifying clusters of blogs that reflect different positions within the literary field.

A middlebrow cluster comprises the mainstream of book blogging. Many of the most internationally popular and well-known book blogs demonstrate aspects of what I have called the new literary middlebrow: reverent towards literature but with an entrepreneurial bent, oriented towards women and the middle-class, emotional, non-academic, earnest, and visibly mediated (Driscoll 2014). It makes sense that many contemporary book blogs would have middlebrow features – blogs are located directly in the spot where accessibility meets tastemaking. Book blogs that participate in new literary middlebrow practices mediate (non-experimental) literary fiction to the public. Many have an authorised feel; this is where book blogs affiliated with organisations usually sit. Some of the earliest models for this kind of book blog are found on Salon.com and Slate.com. A more recent example is Literary Hub, a blog created in 2015 by two US-based independent publishers, Grove Atlantic and Electric Literature, that works primarily as a curator and aggregator of content and describes itself as ‘an organizing principle in the service of literary culture, a single, trusted, daily source for all the news, ideas and richness of contemporary literary life.’¹ In a similar register, Brain Pickings is run by Maria Popova who, in line with middlebrow logics, writes engaging articles on serious literary topics. Other book blogs with middlebrow qualities have a more personal, less professional feel. In his analysis of blog posts about Richard Flanagan’s novel *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, for example, Mark Davis found that many bloggers described their own emotional response to the book, sometimes pitting this against professional reviews (Davis 2017). Middlebrow practices occupy the centre of the book blogosphere just as they occupy the mainstream of literary culture; this is possibly the most visible, and most common, form of book blog.

However, for the purposes of this article and its investigation of book blogging, I focus on two other, more strongly contrasting clusters: a highbrow set of book blogs with particular interest in translated fiction, and a cluster of romance fiction blogs. Because their tastes are more specific, these blogs bring the contours of book blogging into clearer relief, while also revealing some of the cross-currents and flows of hierarchy and authority in contemporary literary culture.

Qualitative methods for researching with blogs include the creation of blogs for data collection purposes (eg Moran-Ellis & Venn 2007); sampling (or soliciting) existing blogs; and content analysis, including textual analysis (Simmons 2008) and analysis of a blog’s visual elements (Hookway 2008); and social network analysis, including through investigation of comments and links on blogs (Chin & Chigwell 2007). My methods comprise textual, visual and network analyses of a purposive sample of book blogs. I ask two key questions of each blog. First, how does this blog model aesthetic conduct; in terms of how to read and what to read, in terms of the modelling of taste? This is answered by closely reading the posts on the

blog, and by observing elements of its presentation. Second, how is the book blog networked; what community or group does it create? This is answered by examining the links on the blog, and the blogger's other activities online and in the publishing industry. This investigation thus brings together literary culture with media studies, in order to increase understanding of readers who blog.

The Highbrow Blogs

Highbrow literary blogs complicate the distinction between amateur and professional literary criticism, by offering long-form, highly intellectualised writing about literature. Book blogs with a dedication to difficult, serious literature include *This is Splice*, Adrian Slatcher, *Time's Flow Stemmed*, *The Art of Fiction*, and *Pechorin's Journal*, and the shared features of these blogs illuminate the tastemaking role they perform in contemporary literary culture. In this section, I will focus on three blogs – *This Space*, *Conversational Reading* and *The Reading Experience* – each of which is based in the UK or US, and has accumulated influence in literary culture over more than a decade.

Stephen Mitchelmore claims to be the UK's first book blogger, blogging for ezine *Spike* from 2000 and setting up his own blog, *This Space*, in 2004. Mitchelmore has a clear, non-commercial vision for his blog: 'If there is one thing that has kept me writing for so long, it has been to find words for an experience of literature that appears to differ so markedly from those at the cash machine.'² Veronica Scott Esposito also began her blog, *Conversational Reading*, in 2004, and launched *The Quarterly Conversation*, a spinoff literary journal, in 2005. Her expressed reasons for starting these sites also signal a desire for serious engagement with literature:

I didn't see a whole lot of places to do the kind of writing about literature that I wanted to do – in-depth writing about great books, but not in an academic sense at all. I started these sites to share my writing, meet other like-minded people, and encourage people to read great literature.³

Esposito's blog posts often focus on writing in translation, which she describes as 'where a lot of the most interesting literature is happening these days.'⁴

Former academic Daniel Green also launched his blog, *The Reading Experience*, in 2004. Describing its origin, Green identifies the influence of otherighbrow literary blogs: 'the discussion I found on these sites – eventually I learned they were 'weblogs' – clearly seemed seriously intended to call attention to new books (especially less well-publicized ones), to print-based literary criticism, and to 'literature' in general.'⁵ He specifically names Mitchelmore and Esposito as models for his own blogging.

The Taste Culture of Highbrow Book Blogs

These literary blogs – and others like them, such as *Literary Saloon* and *the Complete Review* – have a shared aesthetic mode. They are obviously non-corporate, in the sense that

their design aesthetic ignores the dominant principles of best practice for website design. Instead of glossy images and clean typography that resizes effortlessly for mobiles and tablets, these blogs have mixed fonts and blocky table structures. This is the aesthetic of an older internet generation, of blogs that were created in the early 2000s using templates from Blogger or Typepad and may not have been updated. It's also an aesthetic for wordy people; the words are the only enticement on these sites, which seem almost deliberately non-visual.

The focus on words, rather than visual design, is key to understanding the role of these blogs in literary culture. Each blog is explicitly literary in both style and content, presenting essays on poetry, works in translation, experimental and postmodern literary fiction. These posts are substantial contributions, often around two or three thousand words long. Esposito's blog is the most inclusive in terms of recognising literature written by women, while women are rarely discussed on This Space. The syntax of the writing on the sites pitches high. A screenshot of each blog, alongside a representative sentence from a blog post, demonstrates their style.

Figure 1 demonstrates the text-centric presentation of This Space. An exemplary quote from one of Mitchelmore's reviews reads, 'Such a commitment could explain why Knausgaard often specifies a date for an experience, as it thereby depends on what happened or what was felt in a human life, resisting a turn toward sterile abstraction...'⁶

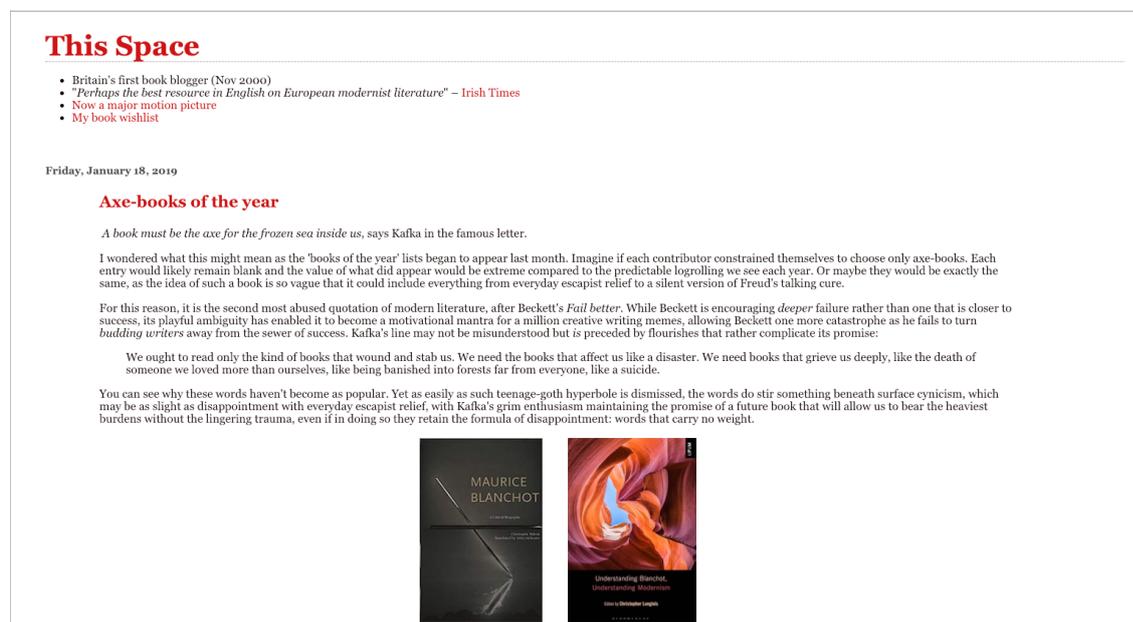


Figure 1: Screenshot of This Space, taken on 5 February 2019.

Figure 2 shows the sparse aesthetic of Conversational Reading, and a sample of Esposito's style is the following sentence: 'The Portuguese modernist par excellence Fernando Pessoa remains an immense figure in world literature. Any significant new translation of his work is an event worthy of attention.'⁷

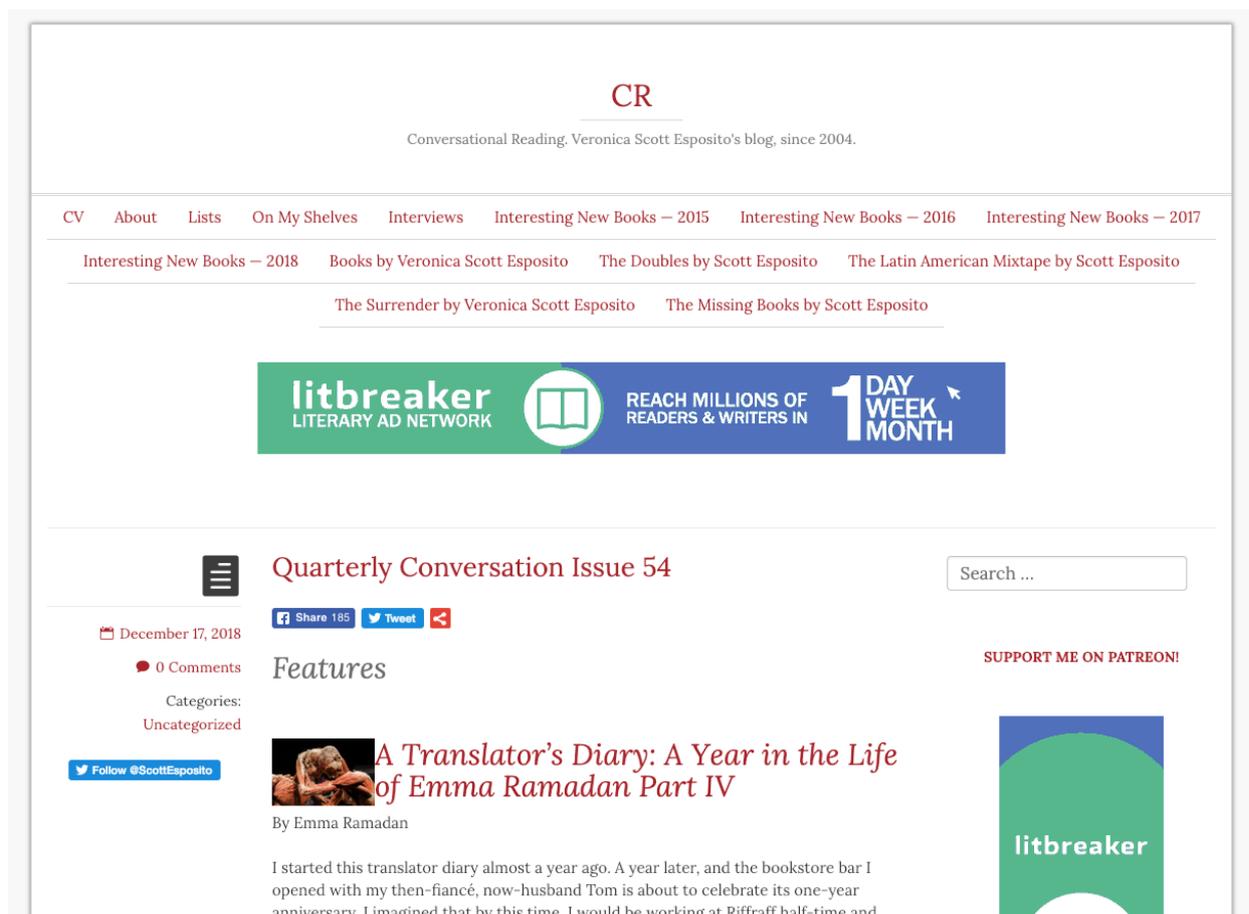


Figure 2: Screenshot of Conversational Reading, taken on 5 February 2019.

Finally, for this section, **Figure 3** (below) demonstrates the block-based design of The Reading Experience. A sample quote from a post by Green is ‘The publication of Sorrentino's first novel after he had established himself as a poet – at least in those quarters of the poetry world whose notice would have meant the most to him – perhaps conveys the impression that writing fiction was a kind of literary second thought.’⁸

The discourse across all three blogs, particularly for This Space and The Reading Experience, is oriented towards the professionalism of the academic or literary critic. Such writing offers an engagement with literature that is not populist, but rather highbrow, even elite, in that it refuses to be accessible. The quote from Conversational Reading is also serious and de-personalised, but its tone is somewhat different. Esposito’s writing is clearer, more straightforwardly structured, and fosters connections between its subject and the reader in a way that tends more towards the mode of the middlebrow.

These three bloggers express a serious, literary disposition that is shared with others. In a complex piece that shows the distinctions within book blogging, and the way it can shade between middlebrow and highbrow practices, Mark Thwaite writes in the *Guardian* about his book blog, Ready Steady Blog (2014). First, he acknowledges its commercial aspect: ‘I'd recently stopped working for Amazon.co.uk and a book review website seemed the best way to keep my contact book live, and keep the review copies coming in.’ He then

describes the network he found: ‘I felt I was joining a real community of dyed-in-the-wool bibliophiles’ (2014). Thwaites’ chosen niche within bibliophilia is literary rather than popular:

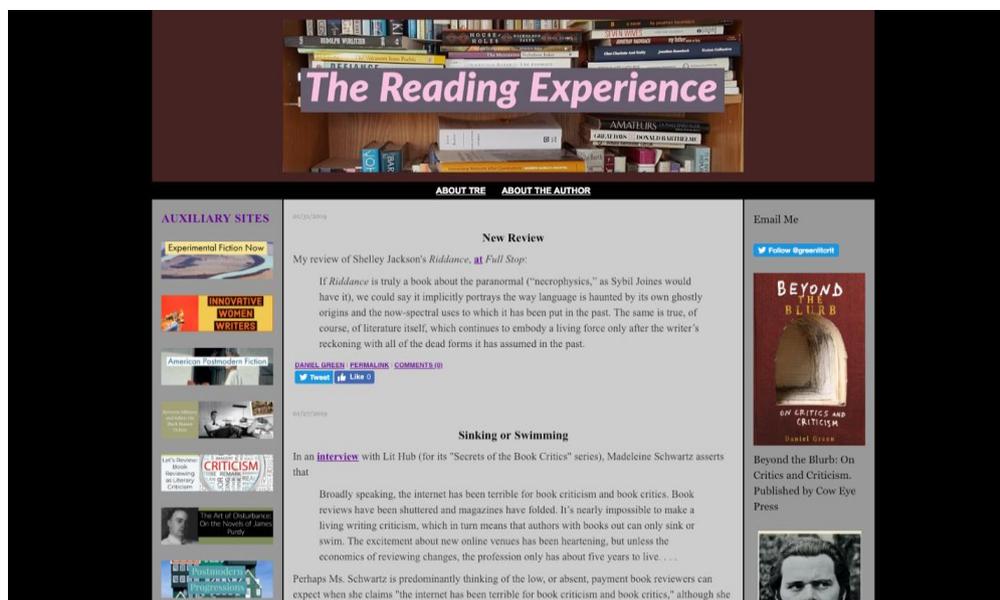


Figure 3: Screenshot of The Reading Experience, taken on 5 February 2019.

Many great blogs focus on genre fiction: the love of vampire epics or raunchy romances, SF or historical fiction. My focus was on ‘serious literature’ – the scare quotes are in place because what is contested as such was also part of the reason to get involved in the fun and the fray of blogging. My hope at the time was that countless blogs would emerge that would prove an untested thesis to which I'd long cleaved: that the attempt by the mainstream media to contain the intelligence of the average reader by trivialising their seriousness could be resisted, and that blogging would prove that readers had far more sophisticated tastes than the broadsheets presume. (2014)

Thwaite’s articulation of niche, highbrow literary values is reinforced by one of the comments left underneath his article: ‘It seems to have been assumed by many enthusiasts for literary blogging that an army of bloggers would automatically produce a corresponding but far larger army of enthusiastic readers. In practice, the number of people likely to be riveted by some humanities graduate’s strenuous, unedited, theory-laden or name-dropping thoughts on his/her reading was always going to be small, and consist largely of like minds.’

The Networking of Highbrow Book Blogs

Highbrow book blogs, then, demonstrate a distinctive taste culture that prizes difficult literary fiction, and longform, near-academic discussion of such works.

In order to understand how these blogs work as sites for the expression of readerly aesthetic conduct, it is also important to investigate the networks they create, and how they connect to other aspects of literary culture. In terms of their relationship with audiences, it is worth noting that while all three of these blogs are free to read (and are not professionalised in that sense), two of the bloggers, Esposito and Green, have or have had Patreon accounts so that their writing can be partly crowdfunded. In the Patreon model, readers sign up to become patrons of the bloggers, contributing a small amount of money each month; in return, they receive special content, including, for these bloggers, ebooks of literary criticism. There is an economy in which these bloggers participate, but it is one with connotations of a private, exclusive arrangement. It is an indication, perhaps, of a movement towards the portfolio careers of the romance bloggers described below, albeit in a different rhetorical register.

These bloggers have authority online. Green, Esposito and Mitchelmore have all been interviewed by other bloggers. A reader's comment under an interview with Green demonstrates the respect he inspires:

What a great interview. I admit, I am intimidated by The Reading Experience. I have clicked over there, and quickly clicked away, because I don't see any footholds... all seems to be authors and books I've never heard of. But reading this, at least I get his approach. And perhaps I will give it another go. I will seek out the book. (Turner 2016)

The authority of these bloggers is also manifest offline, in their paid activities. Blogs trouble the distinction between professional and amateur literary criticism, and one of the clearest signs of this is the ease with which these bloggers convert to and from established professional literary positions. First and most obviously, these bloggers also write book reviews for venues including literary journals and newspapers. Esposito's CV section of *Conversational Reading* lists a large number of pieces written for many publications; as an artefact, the CV points to the professionalisation of her blog practice.⁹ Only a few of Esposito's listed articles were published prior to the launch of her blog in 2004, but as the blog built momentum, her CV shows both an ongoing presence in journals and websites and an increasing number of book reviews for high-profile 'old media' publications, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Green, too, has an established presence in literary journals and websites beyond his own blog. He has written about books for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *3:AM Magazine*, and *The Quarterly Conversation* (edited by Esposito), although he does not seem to have written for newspapers.¹⁰

Mitchelmore articulates a different position, rejecting the synergy between blogging and professional reviewing. He states in an interview:

After a few years of writing, I was asked to write a review for various print publications, including the TLS. This seemed to be a natural progression: from floor to stage, from amateur to professional, from darkness to light. And I wrote about a dozen reviews. But it was distressingly unsatisfying. Everything that generated a need in me to write was removed and I felt like a ventriloquist's doll. Since then I have turned down offers to write elsewhere.

Mitchelmore speaks up for the autonomy of blogging as an intellectual practice – a claim that raises questions about how this kind of blogger might support themselves, given the intensive time commitment required of longform literary work. Even the claim for autonomy, though, emphasises the possibility, even the naturalness, of moving between blogs and professional book reviews, indicating the openness of this path for other bloggers.

Finally, each of these case study bloggers has moved into the professional literary position of book author. This particular conversion of position and symbolic capital from blogs to published literary criticism is a recent development, sometimes facilitated by self-publishing models. In 2015, a book containing 44 of Mitchelmore's essays was published by Zero Books, which focuses on left wing critical theory. It is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing, a UK-based independent company running since 1989, which offers both traditional publishing deals and co-operative (self) publishing arrangements. Mitchelmore's book has primarily been reviewed by other book blogs, rather than by mainstream media, suggesting that his blog has only partly moved to the print world. Green published a book of essays titled *Beyond the Blurb: On Critics and Criticism* in 2016 with Cow Eye Press, a small independent US publisher with a satirical bent: Cow Eye Press' Twitter bio reads, 'alternative publisher specializing in literary fiction with a focus on cows and cattle.' Green is also the author of an ongoing series of ebooks of literary criticism on topics such as women writers and American postmodern fiction, self-published as part of his Patreon model.

Esposito is the author of several books: *The End of Oulipo* (Zero Books, 2013, co-authored with Lauren Elkin), *The Surrender* (a triptych of literary essays about Esposito's transgender experiences, Anomalous Press, 2016) and *The Doubles* (creative non-fiction/memoir/film studies, published with Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2017). Both Anomalous Press and Civil Coping Mechanisms are US-based small presses; Civil Coping Mechanisms' submissions webpage describes itself as 'looking for work so conceptually or aesthetically innovative it simply can't be published anywhere else.'¹¹ Like Green, Esposito has also self-published ebooks linked to her blog. All three bloggers, then, offer examples of how small press, and self-publishing – a digitally-enabled process often associated with genre fiction – can be deployed for literary purposes in the digital age.

In sum, these highbrow, literary bloggers are not only networked with each other and other literary bloggers, but are embedded in professional networks through their writing for newspapers and journals and their position as book authors, where they have connections with small press and a high cultural form of sponsored self-publishing. As a result, they are well positioned as tastemakers. What has been their influence?

Mitchelmore claims that ‘over the last fourteen years of online work, I’ve seen the names of my key writers – Thomas Bernhard, Maurice Blanchot and Gabriel Josipovici – become familiar whereas before they were marginalised.’¹² This is a difficult claim to assess. The very blunt instrument of a Google Trend chart for Blanchot shows that interest has actually gone down in the period since Mitchelmore began blogging,¹³ but this doesn’t rule out a kind of slow-building interest amongst influential literary figures, the subtle word-of-mouth influence that operates in literary culture. Strikingly, though, Google Trends show that interest in Sorrentino, one of Daniel Green’s preferred writers, has steadily gone up,¹⁴ and interest in Pessoa – about whom Esposito has written – has had some dramatic spikes of growth.¹⁵ If high culture is, in John Frow’s phrase, a pocket within commodity culture (1995, 86), then these bloggers are its influencers, and the role they play is similar to that of professional literary critics. The longevity and influence of these serious literary blogs and others like them complicates a straightforward view of the internet as democratising, and suggests that the hierarchies of literary culture persist and are, in some form, reproduced online.

The Romance Fiction Blogs

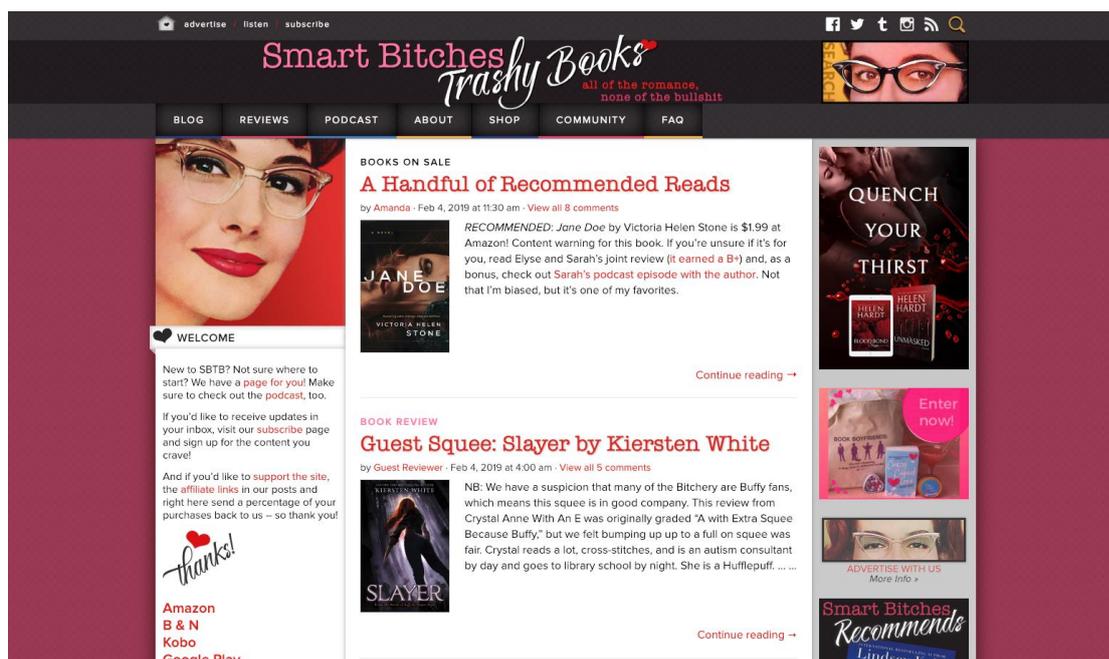


Figure 4: Screenshot of Smart Bitches Trashy Books, taken on 5 February 2019.

The second cluster of blogs I consider is that of romance fiction blogs. Blogs are often active sites for readers of genre fiction, acting as opinion leaders within genre communities. In the romance genre, many blogs are run by women and have large, engaged communities of followers. Three prominent romance fiction blogs, presenting a cross-section of some of the different styles of romance fiction blogs, are Smart Bitches, Trashy Books (SBTB), Natasha is a Book Junkie (NIABJ), and Joyfully Jay.

SBTB is probably the most high-profile and well-known romance fiction blog. Now run by a small team of women, its lead blogger is Sarah Wendell, who started the blog in 2005. SBTB is also popular across social media platforms, with 2,700 followers on Instagram and 40,900 on Twitter. **Figure 4**, above, is a screenshot of the blog that demonstrates its pink and red tones and mix of visual and textual content.

NIABJ is a more personal kind of book blog, run by one reader, Natasha Tomic. NIABJ also has a substantial presence on multiple social media platforms, with 42,000 likes on facebook, 13,600 followers on Instagram, and 22,000 followers on Twitter. A screenshot, seen in **Figure 5**, shows the strong role played by visual images on this blog.

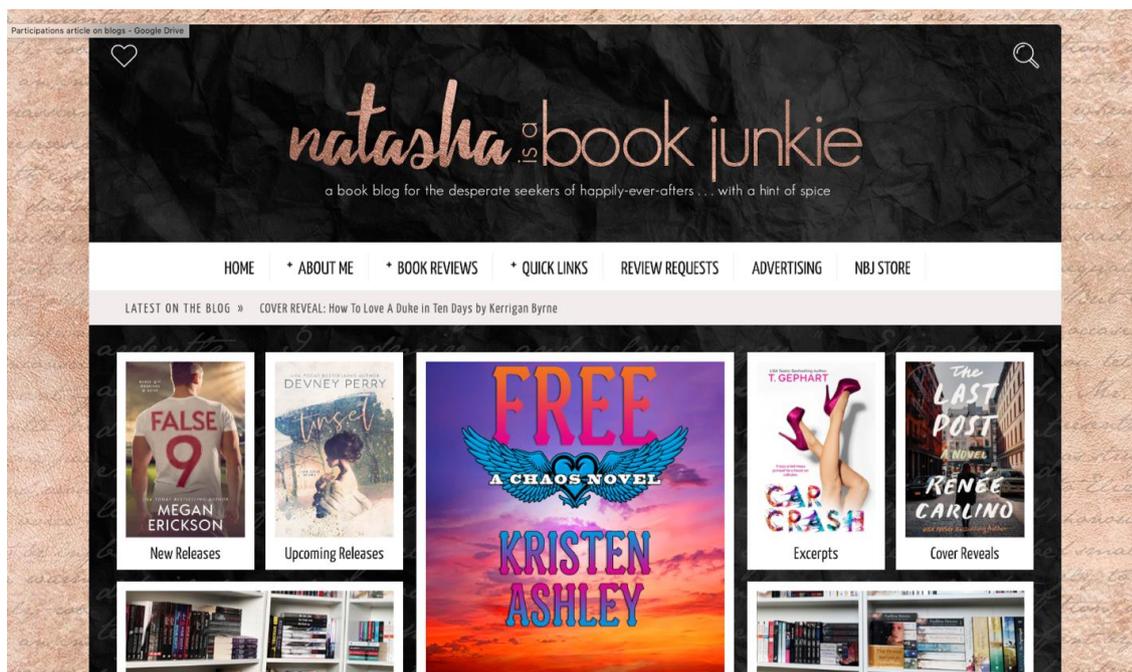


Figure 5: Screenshot of Natasha is a Book Junkie, taken on 5 February 2019.

Finally, Joyfully Jay focuses on a particular subgenre of romance fiction: m/m or male and male love stories. It was begun by a single blogger, Jay, who still coordinates the site, but now includes eight associate reviewers, all women. Joyfully Jay is also active on Twitter, although less so than the other two blogs, with 2,800 followers. The blog runs an email newsletter and a merchandise shop. As the screenshot in **Figure 6** (below) shows, Joyfully Jay also includes visually engaging content, especially book covers.

The Taste Cultures of Romance Book Blogs

Each of these bloggers has articulated their reasons for blogging, and these align strongly with the notion of the blog as a site for self-expression, for the articulation of reading as aesthetic conduct. NIABJ's 'About Me' page, written in the third person, also describes the ethos behind her blog:

Natasha's first memory of a truly blissful moment was curled up in her bed with a good book. Her reading tastes might have changed over the years and become a lot spicier, but her love of books has only grown... Book reviewing was born out of necessity more than anything else. It was either that or losing all her friends because she couldn't stop talking about all the books she was reading. Now, she gets to do it whenever she wishes and not only does she get to keep her old friends, but she was also fortunate to find her book junkie tribe, too.

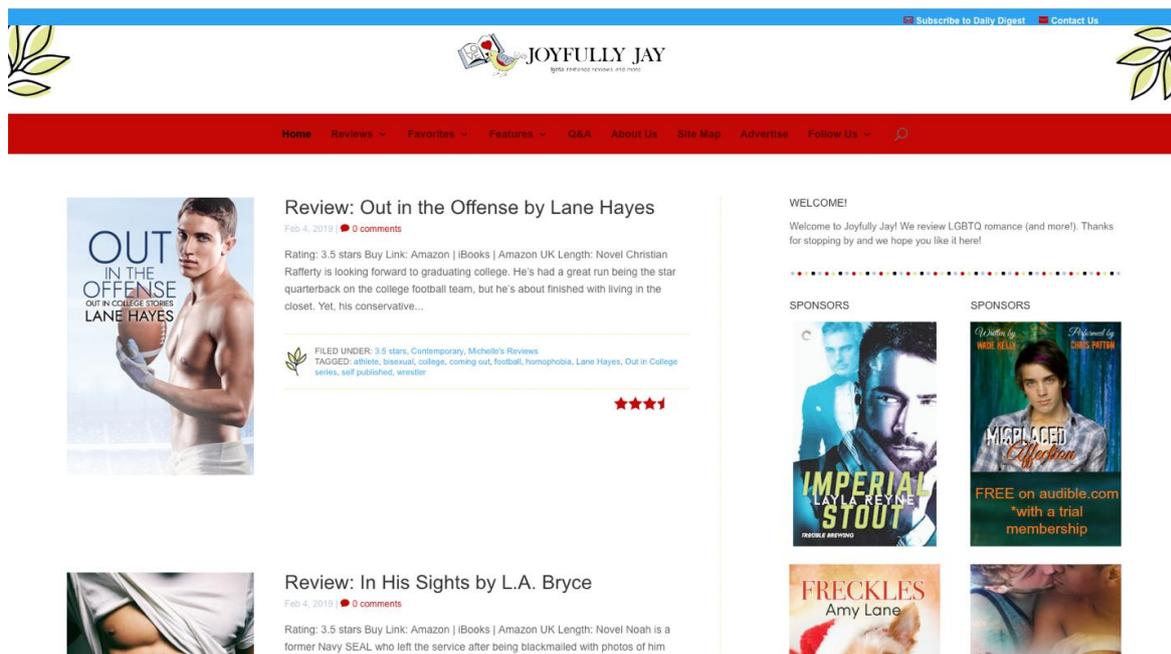


Figure 6: Screenshot of Joyfully Jay, taken on 5 February 2019.

This section also states that Natasha's blog will not publish negative book reviews, but 'will rather focus on the great books she wholeheartedly recommends,' and includes a statement about her privacy: 'She keeps her private life private, but small insights of who she is will inevitably flicker through at times, especially on social media, as she believes that openness of character goes hand in hand with expressing personal views on any matter.'¹⁶ Natasha's biography is an expression of (moderated) personal passion for shared reading.

This personal frame is also evident in the accounts of Joyfully Jay's blogging practice. In an interview, Jay reflects:

I am closing in on my fifth year of blogging and I will tell you, things aren't anything like I expected when I started. First off, I didn't really intend it to be a review blog. I kind of figured it would be a personal blog where I talked about books, tv, or other random things about which I have an opinion (as my husband will attest, that is a pretty long list). But somehow I started with books and before long, I had so much on my plate with reviewing, that is all I did. I

also never even dreamed that the blog would grow the way it has. Things took off almost right away, and I have been holding on for the ride ever since.¹⁷

This is a narrative of a blog organically arising from an individual's interest, then finding its community. It shows the momentum of the blog form and its synergy with the book industry. Yet for Jay it is also a personal 'labor of love,' showcasing aspects of the blogs' labour practices:

Sometimes people ask why I do it, and I will tell you, despite all the work, it is truly a labor of love. Even five years later, I still get excited when I see new books coming out. I still get that thrill when I read something I absolutely love, that total need to tell other people how amazing the book is and get them to read it to. I joke sometimes that I am like the crack dealer – just try it, it is so good, you will love it, just a few pages is all you need to be hooked! There isn't a day that goes by that I don't get a little bit excited about books, and as long as that stays my passion, I know that the work is worth it.

Jay's quote recognises that book blogging is about work, about promoting new releases and operating within the industry, but also about passion. The romance fiction blogs, more than the highbrow ones, clearly showcase the intertwining of passion and commerce in an example of what Brooke Erin Duffy calls (in relation to fashion blogs) 'aspirational labour' (2017). Blogging can participate in a changing economy of cultural work in which having passion qualifies you for entry – with the implication that if you don't succeed you're not passionate enough. Kuehn and Corrigan's work on 'Hope Labour' (2013) in blogs and consumer reviews makes the related point that many forms of online writing are done with future employment in mind. Some book blogs, too, seem (at least partially) designed to showcase the bloggers' work to potential employers; Conversational Reading and Brain Pickings perhaps fall into this category. Others seem designed to become components of small scale businesses in their own right. This latter model is articulated by Wendell, in response to an interview question from another blogger about how she manages her multiple roles:

I pay attention to what needs to get done when, and try to give myself space to be creative about the tasks I want to enjoy. I love podcasting and writing, and I love speaking and meeting readers, so while all of those things are part of my 'work,' I have so much fun doing them that it's not too arduous if I give myself time and space to prepare for each job.¹⁸

This explicit interweaving of business and pleasure is a noticeable contrast to the tone taken by the highbrow book bloggers, who frame themselves as craving an authentic platform to

express their version of the literary. It's an area where the contrast between the types of blogger (and the different economic structures underlying each) is clear.

This contrast between the two clusters is also evident in the strikingly different content of the romance blogs, compared to the highbrow book blogs discussed above. The three romance book blogs are visually complex, with colour (including strong use of pink), several menu tabs running along the top of the page, and multiple images. These images tend to be book covers, demonstrating the importance of covers (and 'cover reveals' as book marketing events) to the romance fiction genre and its online sites.

The posts on each blog are written in an accessible, intimate style. SBTB blogger, Elyse, wrote one of the site's recent book reviews:

Ocean Light is a fated mate romance largely set in a sci-fi-rrific undersea base and it involves marine shifters. Shut up and take my money, right? My only real issue with this book is the same issue I have with a lot of fated mates stuff: there's not enough internal conflict. The fantastic world building and heavy external conflict mostly made up for it though.¹⁹

This post shows a detailed knowledge of the genre, uses an informal style featuring direct address and humour, and frames its critique within an overall enthusiasm.

NIABJ's content includes a mixture of posts, including reviews and cover reveals. Reviews often start in 'blurb', or promotional, mode and finish on a more evaluative note. For example,

I knew this would be a story that I'd love from the start, the very premise of two sexual Dominants falling in love with one another making my skin quiver at the mere thought of it, but this story proved to be so much more than just a love story. It dives deep into the human condition and it doesn't flinch at what it finds there. It moved me in ways I didn't expect, it forced me to step into these characters' shoes in order to understand them better, and it left me utterly amazed by all it's made me feel. An absolute must read.²⁰

The writing here is warm and intimate, mentioning physical responses as well as emotional, and in a spirit of sharing enthusiasm for a book. On Joyfully Jay, a recent review by Kris reads:

This is the fifth, and final, book in the Metahuman Files series and I'll admit I was both incredibly eager to read it and worried at the same time. A final book needs to be so many things, and while I had confidence in Turner's ability, that didn't stop me from being a touch ... apprehensive. But I needn't have worried. Once again, the world building is outstanding in this novel. New things come into play and fit so seamlessly with the world the author has created.

The tone here is very similar to Goodreads reviews, as analysed in a recent article by myself and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2019), and it's no surprise that NIABJ and Joyfully Jay are also active on Goodreads – in some ways, the blog functions as a home for the collection of reviews, a home that, to a greater extent than corporately-controlled Goodreads, is shaped by these readers.

The Networking of Romance Book Blogs

Romance fiction blogs are networked in some of the same ways as other book blogs, including through the use of blogrolls and links, as well as interviewing one another and including guest posts. They also have a significant presence at romance conventions, genre-based live events where readers and authors gather. Romance bloggers also undertake other forms of professional writing, including authoring books.

Sarah Wendell, from SBTB, has appeared at leading writers' festivals, and is also a high-profile guest at romance conventions such as Romantic Times. Wendell is the author of three books: *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*, co-authored with Candy Tan and published in 2000 by Touchstone (an imprint of Simon & Schuster); *Everything I Know About Love I Learned From Romance Novels* published in 2011 by independent publisher Sourcebooks; and *Lighting the Flames: A Hanukkah Story*, a romance novel, self-published in 2014 under the name Smart Bitches Trashy Books LLC. For Wendell, blogging is very much part of a business. In an interview with another blogger, she was asked: 'Many book bloggers aspire to be able to blog full-time. You've gone from blogger to writer to speaker to entrepreneur. What business advice would you like to give our readers?' Wendell's response highlights the commercial underpinning of her blogging:

Keep going, and have a target to reach for. I didn't realize I could make my blog my full-time job until I sat down and come up with a target income that would replace the money I made at my last job. Once I had a goal, I figured out how to make sure I could hit it consistently.²¹

Wendell's blog business has multiple income streams across a range of digital, live and print platforms. Joyfully Jay, while operating on a smaller scale, is also networked across several platforms. Jay has spoken at several romance conventions, and has been interviewed on the Big Gay Fiction Podcast (which includes a Youtube channel).²² Her blog profile mentions that this work sits alongside another job: 'In my off-line life I work part-time from home teaching IT training, writing web content, and trying to make English out of the stuff my IT department writes. Of course writing about romance is much more fun!' Romance blogging is more fun for Jay – it is not her core business – but it does have an entrepreneurial side. Joyfully Jay, NIABJ and SBTB all make use of Amazon affiliate links on their blogs, so that they receive a percentage of any sales made by clicking on ads. SBTB and Joyfully Jay are networked with each other: Jay was interviewed on the SBTB podcast, and the two of them

have co-convened a conference for book bloggers.²³ Tomic is less obviously networked in the media. However, she is thanked as a beta reader and as a leader of fan group 'Abbi's Army' in the acknowledgements of romance author Abbi Glines' *When I'm Gone* (2015), showing that her network as a blogger reaches into the books about which this community is so passionate.

Conclusion: Book Blogs and the New Media Practices of Readers

My analysis of book blogs, while necessarily incomplete, reveals two key features of book blogging as a new media practice undertaken by readers. First, book blogs are inextricably interwoven with the media and publishing industries. Although they are born from passion and driven by love for books, there is no real sense in which blogs are amateur. This is true for even the most highbrow and apparently non-commercial blogs. They are enmeshed, at multiple points, with the commerce of the book industry. This is sometimes made explicit – as, for example, with blog tours, cover reveals, guest posts, Amazon affiliate links, and professional criticism opportunities. At other times, the connections are more masked, indirect or oblique – as with podcast appearances, tweets, or crowdfunding. Romance blogs and middlebrow blogs are more likely to present as professional than the literary blogs, but all have commercial aspects.

The distinction between amateur and professional includes whether one gets paid or not. However, the implications of the distinction, and its blurring, have significance beyond the economic. 'Professional' is also a mark of quality and claiming the status of professional implies a belief that one can do something that others can't, that one has particular experience or accreditation. The concept of professionalism is inflected with debates about authority and trust. Blogs straddle this terrain, in some cases building careers, while also maintaining a separation from industry that aligns them with consumers (readers). While there is no part of book blogs that exists outside the media and publishing industries, there are tendencies and motivations within blogging that are not simply commercial. These aspects of blogging may even be framed in opposition to the commerce of books, or as providing counter-logics and trajectories. While blog networks demonstrate connections to the publishing industry, they also maintain an autonomy – the foundation of a different kind of professionalism – based on readers offering authentic, trusted opinions as a service to other readers.

The second key finding is that blogs do, indeed, articulate and perform reading as aesthetic conduct. Book blogs model how to read, as well as what to read. Choosing, reading and blogging about books are private acts, but they are also shared. Book blogs construct taste-based reading forums, shaping the abundant content of the contemporary media landscape into curated conversations about particular kinds of books – whether mainstream fiction, translated poetry, or romance. Online space is networked space, and blogs create specific kinds of networks where like-minded readers express shared enthusiasms. Analysis of book blogs shows that while new media does enable mass participation of readers in book culture, this participation can be stratified and organised.

There are patterns organising engagement with books online. One of these patterns is hierarchy, not only in terms of taste, but in terms of readerly capital within taste cultures. Regular blogging is a means for readers to accrue a specific kind of readerly capital, of influence on other readers. This is demonstrated in the way leading bloggers are referred to by other readers online, the number of visitors and links to their blogs, and also their transitions into other professional roles, including that of author. The migration of literary culture into digital spaces has provided new platforms for readers to articulate their thoughts about books, and as one of these platforms, the book blog plays a role in shaping the contours of contemporary reading practices.

Biographical Note:

Beth Driscoll is Senior Lecturer in Publishing and Communications at the University of Melbourne and the author of *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave, 2014). Her current research includes the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 'New Tastemakers and Australia's Post-Digital Literary Culture', as well as a forthcoming short monograph on bestsellers and the Frankfurt Book Fair to be co-authored with Claire Squires. Email: driscoll@unimelb.edu.au.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to the editors of this Themed Section, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, and to reviewers Samantha Rayner and David Wright, whose insightful comments and suggestions have enhanced this piece. The research for this article was supported by Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP170103192.

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