

Review: Danielle Fuller, DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers. Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

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In early July 2024, The New York Times Book Review published a list of the 100 ‘Best Books of the 21st Century’ which presented an overview of fiction and non-fiction works published since 2000 and curated by a group of 503 authors, among them John Irving and Roxane Gay. In the week after its publication first hundreds and then thousands of readers contacted The New York Times, voicing their own opinions on what had been omitted and on what should have been included instead, leading to passionate discussions in the comments section. As a consequence, a ‘Reader’s Top 100’ list has now been added.

Danielle Fuller’s and DeNel Rehberg Sedo’s (2023) *Reading Bestsellers* is concerned with exactly these kinds of debates – and also refers to bestseller lists published by *The NYT*, p. 6 — which focus on how readers choose what they want to read and how they recommend it to others, relying on quantitative and qualitative interviews with international readers (Section 2), social media influencers (Section 3) and Gen Z online readers (Section 4), and arguing for the figure of the multi-modal reader, who is not primarily influenced by the category of ‘bestselling fiction’ but rather on networks of recommendation. In addition, three readers – Sara, Priya, and Jana – who emerged from the collected data and were created via a mix of the case profile method (Yin, 2017) and the Baltimore Method (Fuller, 2019) accompany the discussions. The monograph, therefore, exemplifies vividly what audience studies is about, even for readers and students who are relatively new to the field by providing an insight into its key methodologies and concerns.

The volume is part of Cambridge University Press’s *Elements in Publishing and Book Culture* which consists of relatively short (20-30,000 words) volumes on aspects connected to publishing and the book trade. About four ‘Elements’ are strung together in so-called Gatherings which are devoted to a similar topic from different professional perspectives. Fuller’s and Rehberg Sedo’s Element is grouped together with monographs covering the Frankfurt Book Fair (Driscoll and Squires, 2020), fantasy franchises (Gelder, 2019), the relationship between individual creative work and commercial success (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021), and racial inequality in the publishing sector (Dane, 2023). The two most recent additions to this Gathering address the function of the bestseller as a multimodal commercial

object (Fletcher and Leane, 2024) and how readers' national identities shape their reading online (Noorda et al., 2024).

Reading Bestsellers makes for a very concise and yet rich read, which is mostly because of the extremely versatile use of methodology, covering both qualitative and quantitative methods, and successfully connecting the study of literature with the social practices connected to it (see also their previous work, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2013), while being written in a lively and engaging style. The guiding question behind their research conducted online between 2019 and 2021, that is, during the Covid-19 pandemic, is what it means to be a reader – and crucially: a reader who has agency – at a time when old and new media and on- and offline reading practices coincide. It is these rapidly changing structures and with that, also an awareness for the 'parasocial relationships online' (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023: 10) and even forms of intimacy, which necessitates a study of reading communities who do not form in physical spaces. Pointing to differences between the reading communities and highlighting how Bookstagrammers or BookTubers who identify, for instance, as queer or PoC, favour books by writers from similarly minoritised communities and disfavour books by writers who reproduce heteronormative narratives is a very important point, as the publishing industry is still predominantly white (as, for instance, Adiba Jaigirdar, the author of the YA novel *The Henna Wars*, has emphasised, see Crowhurst, 2021). In addition, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo also point to how the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, gained new momentum in 2020 also regarding readers' interest in books by black writers, about racism and Black history.

Each section of *Reading Bestsellers* is devoted to groups of readers who have different characteristics: Section 2 begins – in style reminiscent of a Sally Rooney novel – with the focus on 'Sara', a white cis-gendered female reader in her late 40s (thus also representing the largest age category of readers in the questionnaires, 62%) who lives in Stockholm and has a background in the publishing industry, attends book launches and also enjoys talking about what she reads with her friends, on- and offline. The section, on the one hand, highlights how twenty-first-century readers tend to rely on the recommendations of their trusted others based on shared taste; on the other hand, it discusses how the book publishing industry – through sponsorship of influencers, for instances – now knows much more about their readers than it used to.

Section 3 turns to BookTube and Bookstagram and the practice of, as Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2023: 33) have called it in 2013, 'loving a book in public'. Here, again three representative examples are chosen, namely a Canadian-based book influencer who has been on BookTube since 2011, a North American Bookstagrammer who reads literary fiction and discusses it online because she does not have offline friends to do that with, and a blogger from Western Europe who also studies English literature. What emerges in all case studies is the influencers' mutual perception of fun to engage with stories, the joy of creating content for different platforms, exchanging ideas with others – and an awareness of the responsibility (and challenges) that come with reaching several thousands of readers worldwide.

Section 4 looks at how international Gen Z readers respond to bestselling fiction in English even if this is not their first or only language. The forum used for this is a private Instagram group. The categories that emerge in this group when analysing their responding practices are – apart from a disregard for bestsellers – the affective, informed (especially an interest in issues of representation in the books read) and relational (i.e. the importance of the interpersonal). This is accompanied by a brief interlude introducing us to Jana, a Malaysian student at Melbourne University revising their coursework for 'Intersectional Feminism in a

Global Context', grappling with post-pandemic concentration and at the same time - in this jump into their thoughts - providing an insight into their fellow students interest in fantasy and popular fiction, and indie bookshops that specialise in LGBTQ+ fiction.

The reader figure that emerges from this research is the multimodal reader 'cubed' (MMR³) who navigates reading in a post-digital culture and engages with digital and analogue books on levels of varying intensity, from clicking on 'like', partaking in fan-like practices or being an active prosumer and/or book critic themselves. While this figure is not a new finding of this study but has already been conceptualised by Fuller (2019) herself, this Element provides an insightful look into the practices of actual readers, embedding them in the relevant historical context (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023: 6). I can imagine implementing this brief study in my own teaching as well; in particular, the three 'focal characters' stood out for me as they very vividly encapsulated what is often lacking in academic research on literature: that every piece of fiction, disregarding if it is a 'bestseller' or not, can (and must) be read by human beings who bring their very own stories to that encounter. This privileging of the (affective, personal) relationship between audiences and the media content they encounter also makes the monograph valuable for audience studies, highlighting the heterogeneity of the field and therefore its unique position within the humanities.

Biographical Note

Heidi Lucja Liedke is Professor of English Literature at Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main, Germany. From 2018 to 2020, she was a Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author of *Livestreaming in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre: NT Live and the Aesthetics of Spectacle, Materiality, Engagement* (2023). Other recent articles cover topics such as queer hope, feeling spectators, and idling in Modernist and Victorian writing and have been published or are forthcoming in *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, *Performance Matters*, *Participations*, *The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies*, and *The Handbook of Literary Ethics*. She is the co-editor of a special issue of *Theatre Research International on Presence and Precarity in (Post-)Pandemic Theatre and Performance* (2023).

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