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Cultural Authority and the Discursive Construction of Readers and Literature in Commercially Produced Book Club Discussion Guides

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In communities across the country, growing numbers of men and women from a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds gather monthly in the homes of fellow community members to talk about books they have read. As Long (1986) tells us, these community-based book clubs provide insight into how at least one segment of the reading public "responds to the economic power of the modern book industry and to the cultural authority of the critical establishment" (p. 591). Drawing upon recent scholarship in the sociology of knowledge, literary theory, and sociocultural theories of literacy, this article explores the nature and content of commercially produced "Book Club Discussion Guides" as sources of cultural authority and their potential role in the dissemination of culturally appropriate ways of reading and responding to literature.

Theoretical Background and Rationale

Knowledge and a Social Literature

Recent sociological interest in knowledge and the social construction of reality is a useful framework for examining the notion of a socially constituted and socially distributed "literature." A long-standing concern of the sociology of knowledge is that "reality" is socially circumscribed and that both reality and knowledge are reciprocally related and socially produced (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mills, 1959; Znaniecki, 1940/1970). According to McCarthy (1996), recent interest in the function of knowledge within society has developed along with the idea that "social reality is not a phenomenon that exists in its own right but one that is produced and communicated" (p. 17). The meanings of social events and objects are consequently derived in and through particular systems of knowledge that a society of people comes to accept as real for them. As this perspective makes clear, "knowledges" are those ordered and perpetuated ways of conceptualizing and experiencing the world that make it possible for us to see events, things, and people as something real and worthy of our recognition.

In relation to these points, many of the social realities of modern life are made known to us through the diverse venues of the popular press (e.g., books, news-

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papers, television), as well as through the authorized reports of social scientists, government commissions, political groups, professional organizations, and other agencies. The collective popularity of these "texts" provides insight into the nature of knowledge in society, as well as into the sources of knowledge that we identify as authoritative. Not surprisingly, today's knowledge is expressed and experienced virtually everywhere and in a wide range of settings where cultural production takes place (e.g., TV programs, movie theaters, law offices, shopping malls, classrooms, health clubs, hospitals, police stations, and Internet sites). The growing diversity of these settings calls for an increased awareness of what systems of signification are, including an understanding of new insights into the processes through which these systems are created and their consequences (McCarthy, 1996).

Additionally important, however, is that people realize that these settings and the signifying systems that operate within them are not without their problems. Indeed, the political aspect of the process of knowledge production is intrinsic to any conception of culture where knowledge is contested and developed out of conflict and struggle among competing institutions and groups of people (e.g., Carey, 1988; Williams, 1981). The new sociology of knowledge makes clear this problem of the politics of meaning in everyday life. As such, it seeks to examine and raise questions about the processes in which various meanings are produced, communicated, and eventually experienced by social groups.

Literature as Discursive Practice

In relation to this perspective, all ways of reading books (or literature more specifically) are also socially produced and communicated through knowledges that reproduce the viewpoints of particular social actors or institutions. The meaning of any story-reading event is always subject to a discursive framing by the systems of meaning in which it is experienced and communicated (e.g., Fish, 1980; Hunter, 1982; Morgan, 1990). In their analysis of the texts of popular culture, Bennett and Wollocott (1987) argued that the meaning of any text is always a function of the specific contextual determinations that bear upon and configure the nature of a given reading experience. They describe these configurations as socially based "reading formations—a combination of intratextual and extratextual accounts through which [books are] constituted as objects-to-be-read" (p. 64).

Constructing Literature

In his book, *The Fate of Literacy and the Triumph of Literature,* Willinsky (1991) noted that literature is, on one hand, a unique collection of wonderfully quotable passages well suited to the conversations that inhabit English classrooms across the country. On the other hand, literature is the work of English teachers, professors, literary critics, and communities of readers who make over literature and "give the concept a reality that they and others . . . continue to find in selected texts" (p. 16). Indeed, literature has been "made over" in a number of different ways across the decades, not the least of which has been its presumed

suitability as a vehicle for engendering what Bourdieu (1984) termed "legitimate culture" and political civility—a medium with morally formative powers (e.g., Bennett, 1993).

However, literature has also been conceived as a vehicle for understanding both self and world in a far less prescriptive manner. Numerous scholars representing a variety of intellectual traditions have argued that the act of listening, reading, or responding to the stories of others can have important consequences for the ways we think about our own lives. In general, they maintain that stories are a "morally controversial form" that provide readers with new ways of imagining, critiquing, and participating in the public sphere (e.g., Coles, 1989; Nussbaum, 1991; Tompkins, 1980).

Literature in Book Clubs

Although these more "critical" approaches to stories and reading are not as widely practiced as one might expect, they are not without a rich and important tradition of connecting literacy with productive forms of democratic social life. In her Nobel Prize lecture, Toni Morrison spoke of the power of various languages to obscure or to estrange. Alternatively, she talked about the power of "rousing language." For Morrison, this power abides in our ability to take up a language that commits us to social justice and joins us in productive, democratic forms of community life.

This vision of a vital and democratic expression of hope and understanding is further reflected in the intellectual dynamics implicit in the blues that functioned as a vernacular way of telling about, comprehending, and ultimately transcending the oppressive aspects of mainstream American society (e.g., Baker, 1984; Gates, 1988). Yet another living manifestation of this literacy resides in the interest in literature reflected in women's literary societies and study groups of the progressive era (Blair, 1980; Long, 1992; Martin, 1987). Such groups, these authors suggest, often provided women with a means to discover the eloquence of their voices and the strength of their convictions, and very quickly these literature study circles became a forum for addressing more public issues of progressive reform and democratic public life.

According to Long (1992), the more contemporary "versions" of such progressive era reading groups continue to offer occasions for collective textual interpretation, as well as occasions for engendering forms of critical reflection with personally and socially transformative potential. From our perspective, these accounts throw into relief some of the life-informing and life transforming possibilities that many scholars associate with literacy and reading stories within communities of people (e.g., Freire, 1973; Gates, 1988; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Nussbaum, 1991; Radway, 1991). However, it is important to remember that such a way of reading has almost always occurred in stark contrast to, and in the shadow of, the social and institutional determinants of the literary establishment or the literary academy that continues to define what is worth reading, as well as how to read it (Long, 1992).

More recently, continued growth in the popularity of community book clubs has been paralleled by increased involvement on the part of the book industry itself. Specifically, this involvement is reflected in the creation and dissemination of "Reading Group Discussion Guides." These guides are a kind of "popular" literary primer designed to "enhance" a group's reading of designated books by providing a variety of questions for discussion as well as other book-related information. Although the popularity of such commercially produced "Guides" has paralleled the recent growth in community-based book clubs, we know little about the particular ways of reading literature that they promote. As part of a larger study that focuses on the functions of community-based book clubs in the public sphere, this study examined the content of commercially produced materials and explored how it may contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge about the purposes of literature in our personal and public lives. Specifically, we asked what kind of discursive technology are these guides? Our study offers insight into the modern book industry as a source of cultural authority among the reading public, as well as into the potential processes through which particular ways of reading enter the stock of "official" knowledges "at hand" for an ever-growing number of the reading public.

Methods

Sources of Data

We analyzed the content of 20 "Book Club Discussion Guides" representing four different thematic types of literature from 13 different commercial publishers in order to understand the particular constructions of readers and reading that seemed to be embodied in these materials. These 20 guides were selected from among nearly 200 collected from several commercial book sellers over the course of a year. We conducted a comparative content analysis of each of these guides and determined that many of the books they described could be organized according to four general thematic types: historical, feminist, classical, and contemporary. Although book guides are produced for a variety of fictional (and nonfictional) texts, we selected these thematic types for analysis because they comprised a significant portion of the discussion guides available for book club members. In identifying these thematic types, we analyzed specific descriptive statements or questions in the "Introduction," "Plot Summary," and "Discussion Questions" sections of each guide for information related to the theme of a particular book. We then "purposively selected" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) 10 guides for each thematic type to more or less equally represent the range of publishers in the larger collection. Information pertaining to thematic types and specific publishers is presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Recent work in critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1993) informed our document analysis of the content of book club guides. Fundamental to the

critical discourse analysis perspective is the idea that language is both socially shaped and socially shaping, or constitutive. As it pertains to this study, language (as it is deployed in book club guides) is always constitutive of particular readerly identities, social relations among readers and texts, and systems of knowledge related to literature reading—each in varying degrees. Moreover, this language has the capacity to be both constitutive in socially reproductive ways and in socially transformative ways with more salience given to one or the other depending on the circumstances.

In relation to these points, we conducted interpretive text-based analyses of the content of book club guides for information pertaining to the construction of readers and reading they presented. We organized our analysis along the following three dimensions. First, in order to understand these constructions, we investigated the guides for information pertaining to how they contextualized or situated

Table 1

Selected Book Club Discussion Guides According to Thematic Type

Title	Author	Publisher
Feminist		
A Map of the World	Jane Hamilton	Doubleday
Distance from the Heart of Things	Ashley Warlick	Houghton Mifflin
Range of Motion	Elizabeth Bers	Random House
Girlfriends	Carmen Berry	Reading Group Choices
The Stone Diaries	Carol Shields	Penguin
Contemporary		
The Rapture of Canaan	Sheri Reynolds	Berkley Publishing/Oprah
Reservation Blues	Sherman Alexie	Warner
The Robber Bride	Margaret Atwood	Doubleday
The Fatigue Artist	Lynne Schwartz	Scribner
Possession	A. S. Byatt	Vintage Books
Classical		
The Age of Innocence	Edith Wharton	Penguin
Sense and Sensibility	Jane Austin	Everyman's Library
The Inferno of Dante	Robert Pinsky (Trans.)	Farrar, Straus, & Giroux
Anna Karenina	Leo Tolstoy	Penguin
Invisible Man	Ralph Ellison	Vintage Books
Historical		
The Cunning Man	Roberston Davies	Penguin
Wolf Whistle	Lewis Nordan	Reading Group Choices
Things Fall Apart	Chinua Achebe	Anchor Books
Maus I	Art Spiegelman	Pantheon
Snow Falling on Cedars	David Guterson	Vintage Books

books as objects-to-be-read. In examining the more general contextual work that book guides make possible, we conducted a comparative analysis of each guide in order to describe the kinds of "prefaces," "annotations," and other book-related commentaries they contained. This analysis provided initial insight into the nature of the possible relationships between readers and text that the guides endorsed, as well as into the particular kind of discursive framing of reading they produced. Second, we investigated the aesthetic dispositions and literary tastes implied in the book guides. In this regard, we conducted a content-based analysis of the plot summaries, critical essays, and author interviews/profiles in order to develop a detailed portrait of the nature of the literary proclivities assumed on the part of readers by book guides. Our analysis of these dispositions was based on commentary in the guides that pertained specifically to books, authors, and readers themselves. Finally, we examined the valued ways of reading and responding to literature promoted by book guides. In this case, we focused our analysis on the "Questions for Discussion" they contained. We analyzed approximately 700 questions in the guides for the kinds of knowledge they presupposed on the part of readers, as well as for the ways of interacting with texts they seemed to suggest.

During our analyses, we used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss, 1987), searching for patterns and generating descriptions and explanations that would allow us to construct a portrait of readers and literature reading as it was embodied in book club discussion guides. To enhance the trustworthiness of our analysis, we engaged in a process of triangulation that involved discussing our data and analyses with other researchers. This process continued until we were satisfied that we generated a conception of readers and reading that was grounded in the data and adequate to the task of analyzing the data.

Results and Discussion

Contextualizing Literature

According to Morgan (1990), what counts as "legitimate" reading "always shifts in concert with the changing nature of institutional arrangements and the dominate social discourses of a period" (p. 328). In this regard, our analysis of how book guides situate reading revealed that they almost uniformly locate their respective books in relation to relatively extensive arrangement of commentaries and literary annotations. As a special kind of "literature manual," book guides generally provide very specific kinds of information related to given books. Although some guides are far more elaborate than others, they most often include plot summaries, specific literary information, historical backgrounds, author biographies and autobiographies, critical essays, author interviews, supplementary literature (e.g., poems), and suggestions for further reading. In addition, by far the most extensive section of each book guide is the "Questions for Discussion." Each guide contains approximately 30 to 40 of questions "designed to enhance" a group's reading of a particular book.

Producing the boundaries of literature, literary "prefaces" and "commentaries" act in a kind of preemptive way to produce and legitimize a sort of "English class" version of reading in everyday social life. The attention to narrative styles and techniques, historical background, literary criticism, biography, authorial intent, and so forth suggests a scholastic approach to literature where reading is necessarily built upon attention to formalist ways of reading and understanding "the-text-in-itself." In this way, book guides endorse a pedagogy reminiscent of the early days of English studies when authorized histories, criticisms, biographies, and specialized questions were prerequisites for reading and understanding particular works (Morgan 1990; Musselwhite, 1978).

Aesthetic Dispositions and Literary Taste

Books. Results of our analysis of implied aesthetic dispositions indicate that conceptions of books, authors, and readers, as they are presented in reading guides, are framed in an interdiscursive mix of both educational and promotional language. The guides focus primarily on their respective book content, as well as on more formal stylistic features. The following excerpts, describing both the content and style of several different books, illustrate this point:

> "a darkly humorous tale on culture"
>
> "a profound and redemptive symphony of god and indifference"
>
> "layered and wickedly funny"
>
> "myriad tangled paths and gossipy diversions to beguile"
>
> "poetically nuanced portraits of character and place"
>
> "the novel's pattern is artfully simple"
>
> "the characters are monumental in their graphic individuality"
>
> "written with a remarkable economy and subtle irony"
>
> The book "is as broadly learned as its predecessors, as replete with vividly realized characters, and as dramatic in its presentation."

As an educational project, book guides do not presume a simple or vernacular "gaze" on the part of their readers. Rather, they ask that books be perceived through a particular aesthetic defined by attention to form and style, and generally in terms of formal literary features that would seem to discourage or even deny more colloquial enjoyment or facile involvement with books and, perhaps with other readers.

Authors. The conceptions of authors presented in the book guides reflect a similar viewpoint. They appeal to a formal literary aesthetic, one focused more on the "things of art" than "the things of life" as Bourdieu (1984) explained in his critique of the judgment of taste and the processes of cultural consumption. In references to authors, the guides are primarily comprised of commentary and questions about the author's writing style and ability and his or her professional literary reputation. The following descriptions from several guides are examples of such connecting:

"a master strategist, moving her characters around the gameboard"

"a perfect ear for the interchanges of domestic life"

"How did you arrive at your unique solution to the challenge of Dante's terza rima?"

"In one interview you're quoted as having an interest in 'subversive fiction.' Is *The Stone Dairies* a subversive novel? In what way?"

"one of the major lyric voices of our time"

"demonstrated early a formidable intellect and a great love of books"

"Were you drawn to Anglicanism at the time [prior to writing this book]?"

"Penguin is publishing your first two novels for the first time in the United States. How do you feel about those books today? What in your writing has changed since then?"

As these excerpts suggest, the reader's "eye" is one that is increasingly directed to apprehending and appreciating the importance of fictional styles, stylistic dilemmas, literary reputation, authorial background, and authorial intention. Taken together, book guides assume a readerly identity that embodies a very specific kind of cultural competence, one that has the consequence of ultimately distinguishing them from more colloquial or "everyday" readers. As Bourdieu (1984) explained, this implicit denial

> of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences. (p. 7)

Readers. In the large majority of book club guides we examined, readers themselves are similarly defined. With few exceptions, when it pertains directly to descriptions of readers, the guides consist of commentary containing both implicit and explicit information about valued ways of reading. The following statements provide insight into the kinds of readers book guides presume:

"Some books are meant to be read, others are meant to be savored. *Range of Motion* is both—a book to treasure and to share with old friends and new, and a book tailor made for discussion. . . ."

"Remember the days when you could spend hours talking with friends over coffee about an idea? . . . when the excitement of discovering a new writer was something you just couldn't wait to share? ... fans lined up, begging for an early look. . . . The discussions went on over lunch, between meetings, and in the elevators."

Book guides also provide information pertaining to reasons for reading, as illustrated in the following comments:

"Great lively talk about men, women, war, sex, childhood, lies, and truth; it was all there just waiting to be explored."

"You'll be held spellbound."

You'll read this book "for the clarity and eloquence of its prose, for its bold and perceptive ideas, and for the sheer delight in discovering a long lost treasure by a beloved author"

"One wants to read this powerful novel at one sitting, mesmerized by a story that has universal implications."

Readers, as they are formulated here, do more than simply read books. To the contrary, they "savor" them. They discuss them "between meetings and in elevators" with friends, as well as with other readers like themselves in a world that almost presupposes a kind of "elective distance" from some of the necessities of social life. Their reasons for reading, as promoted by book club guides, tend to imply a detachment from social affairs. Indeed, such guides appear to offer their readers a textual world that promises to leave them "mesmerized" or simply "spellbound."

Ways of Reading Literature

Based on our analysis of the "Questions for Discussion" that appear in each book guide, the following kinds of knowledge and related ways of reading emerge as most salient. Although the focus of these questions vary somewhat within guides for specific books, questions that presuppose reader's knowledge and require them to read in ways that involved (a) interpreting and analyzing characters; (b) analyzing a wide range of narrative or textual strategies to interpret text; and (c) drawing upon relevant historical events, literary history, and related works to interpret text are the most salient kinds of questions. Far fewer questions encourage readers to approach text in ways that involved making connections between text, self, and world or exploring text as constitutive of self and world—as a form of cultural production.

Interpreting and analyzing characters. The book guides we examined provide readers with more questions designed to engage them in analyzing story characters than with any other type of questions. Such questions typically ask readers to speculate on the techniques an author used to develop characters; to describe the beliefs, values, or moral disposition of characters; to summarize the nature of relationships among characters; and/or to interpret the meaning of specific character experiences or decisions. The following excerpts from different guides illustrate the specific nature of these questions:

"How does Spiegelman establish his characters?"

"Racism is a persistent theme in the novel. It is responsible for the internment of Kabuo, Hatsue, and their families, for Kabuo's loss of his land, and perhaps for his indictment for murder. In what ways do the book's Japanese characters respond to the hostility of their white neighbors?"

"Laura's on-again off-again relationship with her lover, Q., is a central theme [in the book]. In the beginning, Laura says, 'Q. threads through my life like an unusual color in a tapestry or a swatch in a cape of many colors.' How would you describe the character of Q?"

Interpreting and analyzing text. Nearly as common as character-specific questions are those that encourage readers to interpret text by identifying and examining a wide range of narrative techniques or textual analysis strategies. In general, such questions invite readers to interpret or evaluate the meaning of specific narrative techniques (e.g., symbolism, metaphor, irony, allusion, flashback, theme, lyricism, literary voice, point of view, setting, and plot structure); to discuss or evaluate an already identified theme as a function of particular events; or to discuss the extent that various themes were present in a novel. These ways of reading are reflected in the following questions related to several books:

> "Mirrors have long been an effective literary device. How do they come into play here?"
>
> "The first chapter of this novel is the only one that is narrated in the first person. Why might the author has chosen to shift narrative voices?"
>
> "Wolf clearly states in the opening pages: 'That we are born alone—all of us who ever lived or will live—that we live alone, and die alone, and that we are strangers to one another.' How does this sentiment pervade the novel? How does Wolfe develop it as a leitmotiv?"
>
> "What is the significance of the grandfather's deathbed speech?"

Reading literary history and scholarship. To a lesser extent, book guides also provide readers with many questions designed to have them analyze text both through and in relation to other literary works or in relation to "official" meanings that the publisher often provides in the context of specific questions. This way of reading, where particular questions suggest that the meaning of a text can be best understood as a function of some historical knowledge, knowledge of related literary works, or an accepted account, is illustrated in the following book guide questions:

> "All of the characters' names are carefully chosen and layered with meaning. What is the significance behind the following names: [list of character names] (Clues to the last three [names] may be found in the poetry of Tennyson, Yeats, and Coleridge cited below)."
>
> "Like Faulkner and Joyce, Wolfe has been acclaimed for his evocation of place. What details in *Look Homeward, Angel* evoke its setting, and what is the relation between its setting and its themes?"
>
> "What significance do you ascribe to Ishmael's name? What does Guterson's protagonist have in common with *Moby Dick*, another story of the sea?"

As the preceding collection of excerpts reveal, "reading," as it is construed in the majority of questions in commercial book club discussion guides, seems largely premised upon the value of recovering or securing a rather academic literary tradition and the requisite approaches to reading that characterize it. Indeed, with their attention to character analysis, narrative techniques, authorial intent, literary knowledge, and "official" interpretations, book guides legitimize a way of reading focused on "the-text-in-itself" far more than, if not to the relative exclusion of, the world to which it refers. In effect, the pedagogical routines reflected in book guide questions stand as a kind of normative authority with the potential to mediate and

circumscribe the nature and experience of reading for practicing book club members.

Reading text and world. Although questions that might encourage readers to glance up from the pages of their novels to find some trace of that text in themselves or in their world are relatively rare, the guides for a few select books do provide more than a token opportunity for this sort of exploration. In general, these guides contain questions designed to encourage readers to discuss the experiences of story characters in relation to their own experiences or relevant social issues; to analyze characters and story events in order to examine one's own moral codes and beliefs; or to engage in discussion aimed at developing an understanding of the power of stories to represent as well as to produce social and cultural meanings. These approaches to literature reading are reflected in the following questions:

> "Coyote Springs faces rejection by their tribe after pursuing their rock and roll dreams off the reservation. Why is leaving the reservation taboo? Can you ever go home again?"
>
> "In the novel, as in real life, the murderers are acquitted. Do you think the verdict would be different today? What recent events support your conclusions?"
>
> "Is there one character you identify with more than others? Why?"
>
> "What cultural tendencies or phenomena does Ellison hold up for satire in this novel?"
>
> "Think of female villains from literature and film. What do they seem to have in common? Is female villainy different from the male variety?"
>
> "The white characters are mostly two dimensional. How is Alexie playing on how native Americans have been portrayed in mass culture?"

Conclusions

An important assumption of this research is that literature reading is framed or "determined" by the variety of constituent "texts" that are brought to bear upon it at a given time. Related to this idea, we sought to understand how readers and the act of reading literature are fashioned through book club discussion guides. In addition, we wondered if the particular ways of reading reflected in book guides were more hospitable to certain kinds of readers and conceptions of reading than others.

With a few important exceptions, the discursive framing of readers and reading evident in book club guides indexes a scholarly and authoritative literary ancestry. From this ancestry, we inherit the image of a "reader" as an academic analyst, similar to that found by Long (1992) in her study of the historical iconography of reading. Almost exclusively, the "curriculum" of the book club guide is not one that is aimed at facilitating a facile or vernacular involvement with stories. Nor is it likely to foster a collective cultural or critical reflection on self or world that commits us to the democratic forms of community life described by Morrison (1993). Rather, the curriculum of such guides bears a striking similarity to the

dominate discourses of secondary school and many college literature classrooms that continue to value close, analytical readings of text. Taken together, the explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation evident in the guides presuppose a familiarity with the internal logic, structure, form, and background of literature as necessarily related to reading enjoyment. In fact, the guides often presuppose a particular kind of engagement with books based on knowledge of a literary code or a cipher, if you will—a "cultural code" (Bourdieu, 1984) that is frequently reproduced by education and primarily spun out of the textual strategies and reading practices of the authoritative academic reader.

In contrast to the street-based literature curricula of the working class men and women of nineteenth-century England, the vernacular expressions of hope and struggle implicit in the "literature" of the blues in early twentieth-century America, or the transformative reading practices of women's literary societies of the progressive era, the curriculum of the book guide promises a much different sort of reading for a very specialized kind of reader—scholarly, ideational, and analytical. With their constraining conceptual perspectives, book guides endorse an approach that is most hospitable to readers with more formal and refined images of reading. Not surprisingly, such practices effectively limit the possibility for participation of readers inclined to engage in more personal or colloquial forms of engagement with stories and the world to which they refer. Because of the prestige that they almost exclusively assign to these approaches to texts, the guides stabilize and reinforce the scholar's position of authority over the reading public and position literature reading as a site for legitimizing particular social differences.

Ultimately, these ways of reading represent a kind of institutionalization of literature—a reading regime in which a particular approach to reading is understood as the natural way of proceeding. In many ways, the questions for discussion, book overviews, author interviews, and other aspects of book club guides represent a sort of "popular" incarnation of the academic literary infrastructure that has historically served as the social and institutional authority regarding what is available to read, as well as what is worth reading. In light of the findings of this study, we contend that book club guides represent a relatively new social mechanism through which the modern book industry is capable of not only authorizing "preferred" books for the reading public but also "preferred" ways of reading and responding to such books in the company of other readers. Although our understanding of this relationship and its consequences for the reading public is a partial one, it raises important questions about the influence of the modern book industry on the practices and consciousness of the popular reading public.

As Fairclough (1993) noted, we live in times where the discourse of American educational and social life is increasingly colonized by the discourse of marketization and commodification. In relation to this point, we argue that commercially produced book guides, like many contemporary advertising approaches, are a potentially powerful social mechanism through which the act of reading is circumscribed and produced for a growing number of Americans who choose to read in community-based groups.

In general, book guides accomplish this process by first envisioning an academic readerly identity on the part of their readers. They then assign this identity, and the requisite ways of reading that accompany it, cultural prestige or authority through various forms of promotional discourse related to books, authors, and readers. Finally, these guides offer a rather select group of readers the promise of "purchasing" a piece of that literary world or curriculum through the questions and literary information they provide. In such a commodity-driven climate, the nature and consequences of such a curriculum and the processes through which it is implemented are seldom considered.

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