

Making U.S. Readers in the Early Twentieth Century

by

Kathryne A. Bevilacqua

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English Language and Literature)
in the University of Michigan
2016

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Megan L. Sweeney, Chair
Professor June M. Howard
Professor Mary C. Kelley
Professor Susan Scott Parrish

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To my parents

Acknowledgements

Research for this project was supported by a Rackham Graduate Student Research Grant, which allowed me to travel to archives in California and Illinois. Special thanks to the Department of Special Collections at Stanford University, in particular Tim Noakes, who confirmed that John P. Wolden's copy of the *Country Life Reader* had indeed found a home in Palo Alto and provided the photographs appearing in Chapter 2. Thanks to the American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in particular Cara Setsu Bertram, who helped during my visit and later reviewed the permissions for the images in Chapter 4. Thanks to the University of Kentucky, in particular Matthew Harris, who provided a digital copy of a draft version of the *Indian's First Book* from the Cora Wilson Stewart Papers. Thanks to the University of Michigan libraries, whose stacks and catalogues proved to be full of serendipitous discoveries. Finally, while no materials from the Fanny Butcher Papers made it into this version of the project, I am grateful to the Newberry Library in Chicago for providing my first real archive experience back in October 2010. The excitement of that trip has sustained this work throughout.

In addition to these physical archives and the archivists who manage them, I must also acknowledge that this project would have been all but impossible without the digital archives and search tools provided by ProQuest, HathiTrust, and Google Books.

My deepest thanks go to my committee, who, in their mentorship and scholarship, have been unparalleled models of curiosity, generosity, and care. Mary, Scotti, June, and Meg have each left their mark on this project in obvious and imperceptible ways, and the timely, trenchant questions they have asked of me and my work will continue to shape my thinking on reading, history, and literature. I am especially thankful for Meg, who has been my most "critical reader" in every possible positive sense of the term. Her patience and willingness to see the possibilities of my work when I could see only the problems has been an unwavering source of support throughout this process.

Thanks to the American Studies Consortium at the University of Michigan for sponsoring a fruitful workshop of a draft of Chapter 4. Special thanks to Christie Allen, Lizzie Hutton, and especially Julia Hansen for the exchanges of writing, ideas, and encouragements. To the rest of my cohort-mates and colleagues—in particular, Adam Sneed and Anna Sheaffer, John Paul and Ryan Hampstead, Emily Waples and Anthony LoSapio, and Kristin Fraser—thank you for making Michigan feel like home. Special commendation goes to Logan Scherer, who, in our year as housemates and six years as friends, taught me that while graduate school isn't all diamonds and rosé, it should be. And thank you to Sarah Mass, who I hope will keep accepting my final acknowledgement in many more projects to come.

Finally, thanks to my family for their unconditional support. To my sister Lauren and my friend Ty, thank you for ensuring that California remains "home" no matter how far I wander. My Aunt Lynda remains the original English major in the family, and I thank her for all she has done to instill a love of words in me from an early age. And of course, I thank my parents, who have done so much for me with so much love.

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Abstract

“Making U.S. Readers in the Early Twentieth Century” considers how definitions of “reading” and “being a reader” circulated through mass-mediated textual materials associated with three of the period’s increasingly influential institutions: the school, the newspaper, and the library. For a period that thought deeply about the implications of expanding networks of literacy and print, I assemble a formally and disciplinarily diverse archive of materials that represents the breadth of this period’s public thinking on reading. By closely reading standardized silent reading tests, beginning reading primers for illiterate adults, newspaper book reviews, and library publicity materials, I distill the complex set of practices, attitudes, and behaviors—some textual, many not—that signified “being a reader” for different types of subjects. As these materials teach to their varied audiences, “reading” is not merely an internalized, personal practice, but is a highly contingent form of sociality, a way of understanding one’s position in a world that is increasingly organized by print. As I show by paying special attention to invocations of non-reading, the stakes for reading in this period were high, especially as “being a reader” became a mode of modernization, civility, and American citizenship.

As a contribution to the history of reading, “Making U.S. Readers” provides a model for recovering specific meanings attached to reading in the past by looking beyond the inner experiences of individual readers to the larger structures of thought and feeling that gave individual reading practices their social significance. A key insight that stems from this method is the importance of “non-reading” to a history of reading, particularly in times in which “reading” is highly politicized. As a contribution to literary history, this dissertation offers a way

of conceiving of literary studies itself as a project of “making readers,” one that can find many of its ideological ancestors in the non-literary projects of the early twentieth century. Rather than set literary reading apart from more obviously instrumental modes of reading, I suggest that we should embrace the instrumentality of our reading practices and ask unambiguously what types of readers we hope “literary reading” can make.

Introduction

Reading to Become, Becoming Readers

In 1924, Harvard literature professor John Livingston Lowes delivered a commencement address on reading.¹ Though Lowes was an expert on Chaucer and Coleridge, he set aside scholarship for the occasion to expound instead on “simply reading, as men and women have always read, for the delight of it, and for the consequent enriching and enhancement of one’s life” (9). Facing the “modern malady” of driving speed, relentless movement, and ruthless efficiency, Lowes offers reading as a potential means of slowing down the quickening pace of life (9). Throughout his speech, he burnishes his own *bona fides* as a reader with extensive quotations from great writers and readers of the past—Montaigne, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold—using these citations as an appeal to the timelessness of reading and its transformative powers. Even “forgotten, relatively worthless books” (22) and “the dullest reading” (29) can provide the raw materials of delight and education, so long as the reader approaches her task with genuine investment in “alert intellectual curiosity” (29). As he reaches his stirring conclusion, Lowes borrows from Goethe to proclaim, “as we read, our spirit is enriched and grows, and we *become* something” (33, emphasis in original). The “something” that readers can become is nothing less than “true humanists,” which is to say, “human beings” (33-34). With his lofty tone, abundant platitudes, and quasi-metaphysical belief in the power of “simply reading,” Lowes makes the classic case for reading as an antidote to modernity and as a stepping stone to full subjectivity.

¹ Lowes delivered the address twice, once to the graduates of Simmons College on June 9 and again to the graduates of Radcliffe College on June 18.

While Lowes was ruminating on reading's potential to grant humanity a reprieve from the "hurly-burly of the world" (36), Nila Banton Smith, a Columbia-trained teacher and reading researcher, saw reading's role in modern life in a very different light. In *One Hundred Ways of Teaching Silent Reading* (1925), a pedagogical manual designed for primary school teachers, Smith eschews the types of transhistorical claims about reading that saturate Lowes's address. Instead, she argues that reading in the third decade of the twentieth century must adapt to very particular pressures. "Our present social needs demand more efficient methods of reading than those which have been employed in the past," Smith writes in her preface, and "rapid, comprehensive silent reading satisfactorily meets these needs" (iii). Like Lowes, Smith paints a picture of a fast-paced, modernized world, but rather than set reading apart from this world, she locates reading at its epicenter. "We are surrounded with reading materials on every side": books, magazines, newspapers, and telegraphs, as well as professional journals, government policy, instruction manuals, road signs, and even the written captions of silent films (6-8). In this world of text, reading is not an activity limited to study or leisure time for the purpose of delight; rather, reading is an essential survival strategy for "people in the everyday walks of life"—from doctors to plumbers to housewives—as personal, professional, and intellectual development and well-being depend on the effective execution of a variety of reading practices (11). Where Lowes rhapsodizes about "simply reading," Smith shows how *no* reading is simple in the modern, complex, textual world.

Despite their clear differences in genre, audience, and tone, Lowes and Smith share an abiding concern for the status of reading in modern American life. Both demonstrate a keen awareness that reading *now*—that is, in the first decades of the twentieth century—must offer the reader a way of understanding her place in modernity. For Lowes, reading offers a step back or

even outside of history; for Smith, reading serves to ground the reader firmly in the present-day. Both address a set of questions—who should read, how to read, what to read, why to read—that betray how contested and variable a practice like reading could be. Speaking to female college graduates, Lowes assumes that his listeners constitute reading the same way that he does, with shared textual frames of reference and interpretive questions learned (Lowes hopes) from their English professors. While Smith anticipates a wider range of readers, she nevertheless assumes that they all value silent reading over other reading practices because of the latter’s distinct usefulness to modern living. Both gesture to these contingencies by arguing that reading is a highly personalized way to “*become* something”—whether that something is a better human being or a better plumber. And yet, both speak from institutionally-embedded platforms—in Smith’s case, the textual platform of the pedagogy textbook; in Lowes’s case, the literal platform of the commencement stage—and as such, their commitments to reading as a personal practice are complicated by their complicity with institutional forms of discipline and conformity.

Taken on their own, Lowes and Smith offer fairly typical examples of their respective genres, with each addressing reading for a different purpose and audience. Taken together, however, they begin to reveal the rich tapestry of assumptions, contradictions, and desires that shaped discourses on reading in the early twentieth century United States in a variety of different texts and settings. In “Making U.S. Readers,” I consider how definitions of “reader” and “reading” circulated through mass-cultural textual materials associated with three of the period’s increasingly influential institutions: the school, the newspaper, and the library. Each of my chapters assembles an archive of mundane institutional materials that were, I argue, crucial instruments for installing and enforcing ideas about “reading” as an ethical practice and “being a reader” as a mode of identity. Through standardized reading tests, reading primers for illiterate

adults, newspaper book reviews, and library publicity campaigns, I distill the complex set of practices, attitudes, and behaviors—some textual, many not—that signified “being a reader” for different types of subjects. In the history of reading I tell, reading is as much a means of self-improvement as a mode of deception, as much a way of signaling belonging as of desperately fending off exclusion. As I refract the monolith “reading” through a prism of historically-situated desires and pressures, I show how high the stakes for reading became when this imprecise, primarily illegible practice became pegged to standards of modernization, civility, and American citizenship in the early twentieth century United States. My dissertation not only recovers how these stakes were created, but also asks how they continue to shape our understandings of reading today and our investment in making readers.

The following introduction lays the historical and methodological groundwork for the chapters to come. The first section provides a bird’s-eye view of the status of reading in the turn-of-the-twentieth century United States. The explosion of print and literacy has long been noted as a defining feature of this period’s “culture of print,” and I draw attention not only to the expansion and consolidation of institutions that supported reading and writing, but also to the self-reflexiveness of these institutions. As I argue, a significant portion of the expanding print culture of the time was *about reading*: Lowes and Smith are but two examples of the wide-ranging discourses on reading that emerged across newly coalescing academic disciplines and professions, as well as in popular culture. The materials that I examine in subsequent chapters are part of this trend, as they self-consciously reflect on the material and ideological changes that “reading” (in various forms) was undergoing. The second section provides a theoretical and methodological overview that situates my work in the interdisciplinary conversations of literary history and the history of reading. Faced with the evidentiary challenges of studying readers and

reading practices of the past, I discuss how looking to mediating institutions may provide oblique but nonetheless robust forms of evidence of the various ways that “reading” signified during this period. My investigatory focus is not on evidence of real readers and reading practices, but rather on the wide-ranging, non-literary documents that gave those practices their meaning by circulating rules for and representations of “being a reader.” Finally, a series of chapter synopses will explain my four case studies and the different views onto reading afforded by each.

A Golden Age for Reading about Reading

In their prologue to the fourth volume of *A History of the Book in America*, Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway declare, “Between 1880 and 1940 the production, distribution, and consumption of print was so pervasive a part of daily life in the United States that it became the habitual arena for the achievement of all sorts of purposes, from business to religion, from leisure to organizational life” (3). The description of the emergence of what Kaestle and Radway term a “culture of print”—in which “print and publication became indispensable to the business of American life during this period”—is, by now, a critical commonplace, most often narrated in terms of technological innovation, institutional proliferation and consolidation, and ideological change (“A Framework” 15).² In the following section, I will offer my own historical overview of this period, focusing specifically on how technological, institutional, and ideological developments created the conditions for broad institutional interest in “making readers,” that is, in developing, theorizing, propagating, and policing the ways in which “being a reader” could stand in for a bevy of social practices and forms of belonging. Examined quantitatively and qualitatively, this period saw a rise in the number and types of people who could read, which in

² For similar versions of this broad historical story, see Kaestle and Radway, “A Framework” 7-15; Forde and Foss 127-128. For a version focused specifically on newspapers, see Mott 497-508. For a version focused specifically on book manufacturing, see Tebbel 654-660.

turn engendered more capacious understandings of how varied and variegated reading practices could be. Institutional sites of reading—ranging from primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, adult education programs, public libraries, and the popular press—not only provided spaces for new configurations of print literacy, but also generated a considerable body of print themselves. This segment of the period’s larger “culture of print” reflected explicitly on the potential meanings of reading, and I argue that the expansion of this particular kind of print is one of the defining characteristics of this period. We might broadly call this genre “books about reading,” but that label does not do justice to the variety of professions, textual forms, and publication networks that developed and theorized ways to study, measure, teach, guide, assess, and improve the reading habits and practices of a wide variety of people. By recovering some of these highly self-conscious sites and materials, many of which may be overlooked by explorations of “literature” or literary reading practices, my dissertation attempts to restore some of the richness and variety to this period’s multifarious discourses of reading.

Perhaps no institution changed as much from the nineteenth century to the twentieth than the U.S. public school. The last decades of the nineteenth century not only saw a wide-scale increase in the number of students attending school, but also presaged the bureaucratic consolidation of schools that would reach its height by the 1920s and 1930s (Tyack and Hansot 106). State-level compulsory school attendance laws,³ coupled with demographic shifts that saw populations rise in the country’s urban centers, translated into a “massive new influx of students into secondary schools beginning around 1890”: while only 6-7% of children aged 14-17

³ Massachusetts had the first modern compulsory attendance law in 1852. By 1900, 34 states (four of them in the South) had similar laws (Cubberley 380; Lingwall 6). Lingwall shows how such laws varied widely in terms of both the minimum and maximum ages between which children were required to be enrolled in school and the annual duration of their enrollment. “For example, New Jersey required 20 weeks from 7-12 year olds in 1900, while Kentucky required 8 weeks from 7 to 14 year olds” (Lingwall 5).

attended school in 1890, 32% of the same group did in 1920, and nearly half of the same population—numbering four and a half million students—were enrolled in 1930 (Kliebard, *Struggle* 7). Put another way, while the total population of the United States increased 68% between 1890 and 1918, the number of high school students increased 711% (Tyack 183). With this boom in student populations came a boom in infrastructure: total spending on public elementary and secondary schools increased an order of magnitude from \$214 million in 1900 to \$2.2 billion in 1928 (*Statistical Abstract...1930* 114).⁴ While access to education was still highly contingent on racial and geographical variables,⁵ across the board, more students—and more types of students—had access to formal education.⁶ Carl Kaestle describes the years from 1880 to 1920 as a time “when the population was broadly if not highly literate,” and indeed, Census-collected literacy statistics show a marked improvement during this period (“Preface” xv). Illiteracy rates dropped from 10.7% in 1900 to 4.3% in 1930, with certain demographic groups— notably, African Americans—making particularly large gains (*Fifteenth Census* 1223).

The quantitative boom in primary and secondary education prompted a qualitative reevaluation of the fundamental purpose and potential of public schools. As schools grew in size and scope, playing the role of “an ever more critical mediating institution between the family and a puzzling and impersonal social order,” the battle to define how and what schools taught energized a generation of reformers (Kliebard, *Struggle* 1). Whether they championed a

⁴ Tyack notes that over this same period, “[T]here was, on the average, more than one new high school built for every day of the year” (183).

⁵ In 1900, while 54% of white children aged 5-20 were enrolled in school, non-white children were only enrolled at a rate of 31% (Snyder 14). “Non-white” is glossed in this source as “Black and other races.” When broken down further along gender lines, white boys and girls showed nearly identical rates of enrollment by 1900, while enrollment among non-white girls was 3-4% higher than that of non-white boys (Snyder 14).

⁶ Of course, statistics only count students in schools that are visible to an official government apparatus like the Census. They exclude important informal educational networks, such as those that flourished among formerly enslaved blacks in the South during Reconstruction. According to Adam Fairclough, even the Freedman’s Bureau could “only guess” at how many children and adults sought and received education in “native schools,” Sunday schools, and other organized though unofficial institutions (29).

curriculum that aligned with a child's natural interests and abilities, or attempted to apply scientific management and efficiency strategies to education, or looked at schools as incubators for a radical new social order, Progressive Era reformers theorized the psychological, economic, and social dimensions of education in brand new ways (Kliebard, *Struggle* 23-25). As we will see in Chapter 1, the budding fields of educational and psychological measurement that emerged from these ideological struggles over curriculum planning and school management directly reshaped ideas of reading for generations of U.S. students. Furthermore, educational reform and expansion was in no way limited to primary and secondary schools. In higher education, the founding of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 provided a model for university reform, as its leaders embraced a European research model dedicated to producing new knowledge (Graff 57-58). Vocational education, formally recognized and funded by the passage of the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act of 1917, grew throughout the post-Civil War years in institutions built on European models and philosophies of industrial education (McClure 19-26). This type of instruction often found racialized applications, most famously in places like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (founded in 1879) and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute (1881) (McClure 26-27). By 1930, changes in educational philosophy were reflected not only in the number of schools in the United States, but also in their increased variety: the Department of Commerce's *Statistical Abstract for 1930* divides school facilities into at least 26 different categories, based on factors such as student demographics (age, gender, race, disability), funding structure (public or private), and curricular specialization (vocational, professional, commercial, reform) (107-129).⁷

⁷ For more on how vocationalism and job training became embedded in the curriculum of all levels of schooling, see Kliebard, *Schooled to Work*. For specific insight into the experiences of American Indians placed in boarding schools across the country, see Adams.

Other types of independent educational opportunities for adults found sponsorship in a wide range of institutional settings, each of which embraced different understandings of how literacy practices could structure or dictate social practices. Fueled by the progressive movement's conflation of white middle-class values with visions of social melioration, many of these programs were aimed at recent immigrants or members of the working class, such as the settlement house programs made famous in the United States by Jane Addams, union-run literacy programs, and Americanization classes.⁸ Others were built around firmly middle-class forms of association, such as social clubs divided along lines of gender and race.⁹ Still others found ways to translate a desire for self-improvement-through-reading into new forms of print commerce, such as the Harvard Classics collection (first marketed as "Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot-Shelf of Books" in 1909) or the Book of the Month Club (founded in 1926) (Rubin 27-29, 94-95). My discussions of Cora Wilson Stewart's grassroots anti-illiteracy efforts in Kentucky (Chapter 2) and of newspaper book reviews (Chapter 3) represent the range of extracurricular opportunities that existed to help adults negotiate their place in expanding networks of print.

Finally, any overview of this period would be incomplete without mention of the era's other massively proliferating institution: the public library. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, states began to allow cities and towns to use tax revenue to fund public libraries, and this new funding model allowed for the steady growth of library facilities through the end of the century (Pawley, "Introduction" 3-4). Private philanthropic organizations made additional investments in library infrastructure, most notably, the Carnegie Corporation, which funded the

⁸ Wan examines the similarities between these types of extramural (i.e., outside of primary and secondary schools) training programs—namely, those sponsored by government organizations, private charities, and workers' unions—and the first-year writing programs that began in the same moment of "literacy in crisis" in the 1910s and 1920s.

⁹ On the women's club movement and the intersection of cultural work and literacy practices, see Gere. On African American literary societies, see McHenry.

construction of 1,689 public and academic libraries (many in small towns in the Midwest and West) between 1886 and 1917 (4). Along with the Carnegie funds came an architectural template that further opened the physical spaces of libraries, aligning their construction with evolving ideas about library use.¹⁰ No longer the purview of elite white men, public libraries professed to be “free to all,” and installed themselves in the civic imaginary of America.¹¹ Chapter 4 will consider how libraries helped imagine reading as a militarized and nationalized practice during World War I. Of course, just as with other forms of institutional life, access to public libraries was still heavily circumscribed: while prevalent in urban centers, where libraries sponsored Americanization and home-reading extension courses, library service was highly limited for African Americans and almost non-existent in rural areas of the United States.¹² Nevertheless, as both “temples of tradition and engines of progress” (Augst, “Introduction” 2), libraries must be considered as major institutional players in the creation of this period’s “culture of print.”

As institutional spaces for writing and reading expanded and consolidated, they helped mediate the literacy practices of a growing and varied population. In “Making U.S. Readers,” I argue that these institutions played a crucially important mediating function in reflecting on the very ideas about print and literacy that they hoped to instill in their patrons. Indeed, the heightened self-reflexiveness of this moment is a defining characteristic of its “culture of print”: not only was there a proliferation of print to read and a proliferation of uses for reading, but also a large portion of these new printed materials directly addressed both practices and underlying theories of reading. The growth of institutions contributed directly to this growth in print. The

¹⁰ See Van Slyck for an architectural historian’s take on impulses behind and influence of Carnegie’s library grants.

¹¹ Thomas Augst has even gone so far as to suggest that the library took on many of the social purposes served before by religion, in turn making “particular habits of reading central to the rituals and pieties of secular modernity” (“Faith in Reading” 153).

¹² Louis Round Wilson’s 1938 survey of library services revealed vast disparities in geographical access across the country, especially in the South. For a more recent exploration of the separate but very unequal nature of library services for African Americans in the Jim Crow era, see Knott.

increasing number of primary and secondary schools, along with curricular reforms that sought to standardize learning on state-wide levels, made the market for textbooks even more lucrative and competitive than it had been before.¹³ A new generation of reading primers took up the mantle of the *McGuffey Readers* (the most popular reading primer of the nineteenth century); these primers were increasingly authored by newly minted professors of education at places like Teachers College at Columbia University or the University of Chicago (Venezky and Kaestle 425). In addition to books for use by students in schools, there were practical handbooks on teaching reading. Nila Smith's aforementioned *One Hundred Ways of Teaching Silent Reading* (1925) rode the wave of teaching manuals that offered pedagogical strategies for new trends in reading instruction like phonics-based methods and silent reading. These texts not only provided practical pedagogical advice, but also reflected on the stakes of reading as a modern social and cultural practice.

Additionally, the new research protocols installed in American universities gave rise to professionalized research on reading.¹⁴ Edmund Burke Huey's *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (1908) crystallizes the moment at which experimental psychology turned its attention to reading. His over-400-page book offers a history of reading and "reading hygiene," in addition to an extensive discussion of current research into reading as a physiological and cognitive process. Huey's work comes on the cusp of a boom in scientific research into reading, inspired as much by developments in psychology as by work in the nascent field of educational measurement and assessment. As leaders in the field such as Edmund Thorndike at Columbia, Lewis Terman at

¹³ For an account of the influence that state education authorities had on the coalescing market for textbooks in the early twentieth century, see Shapiro.

¹⁴ Radway, in "Learned and Literary Print Cultures in an Age of Professionalization and Diversification," offers a summative account of how the development of the American research university in the late nineteenth century had lasting effects on print-based protocols of scholarly communication. See also Rubin, "Making Meaning," for more on social scientific studies of reading through this period.

Stanford, and William Gray at the University of Chicago began training a cohort of researchers, the pages of journals such as the *Elementary School Journal* (first published in 1900), the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (1910), and the *Journal of Educational Research* (1920) were full of studies on reading, so many that this type of study soon merited a separate index. When Gray compiled his first *Summary of Investigations Relating to Reading* (1925), the book digested 436 studies; in subsequent annual updates, published in the *Elementary School Journal*, this count would increase by hundreds each year.

Librarians lagged somewhat in establishing a similar research-based body of work on reading, but the founding of the Graduate Library School (GLS) at the University of Chicago in 1926 helped propel a concerted program of library science research, much of which focused on reading. Led by researchers like Douglas Waples and Louis Round Wilson, GLS faculty and students produced an astounding amount of research on library usage, reading habits, and print culture. This research was published almost exclusively by the journal *Library Quarterly* (begun in 1931) and in a dedicated University of Chicago Press monograph series.¹⁵ Before then, the American Library Association published journals and conference proceedings on wide-ranging debates in professional librarianship. Finally, the expansion of periodical publication supported specialized journals such as *Publishers' Weekly* (started in 1873), the *Journalist* (1884), the *Writer* (1887), and *Editor and Publisher* (1901), all of which offered reflections on reading and writing, for and by print professionals, in a rapidly changing media ecology.¹⁷

Professional discourses on reading in education, library, and publishing circles were matched by popular discourses on reading in both niche and mass-market periodicals and books.

¹⁵ See Karetzky 49-59 on the initial establishment of the Graduate Library School and the debates within the profession on the nature of librarianship that the school's research program had to negotiate.

¹⁷ See Forde and Foss for a study of how these types of sources helped consolidate definitions of journalism and literature.

With the explosive growth in periodical publishing, book reviews, author profiles, and meditations on literary trends proliferated in magazines and newspapers at all levels of the print culture hierarchy. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries also saw an explosion in the publication of “reading advice” books, a genre that Amy L. Blair argues made its “direct appeal to a new generation of literary novices, people whose education had topped the barrier of literacy but who had not been able to breach the barrier of taste” (4-5). Tellingly filed today under the Library of Congress subject heading “Best Books,” titles such as Lyman Abbot’s *Hints for Home Reading* (1880), Edwin L. Shuman’s *How to Judge a Book* (1910), Jesse Lee Bennett’s *What Books Can do For You* (1923), and May Lamberton Becker’s *Adventures in Reading* (1927) bear the hallmarks of this genre: written by journalists, critics, or public intellectuals; produced by major publishing houses; peppered with Arnoldian platitudes about the “best” of culture and the goodness of reading; and almost always supplemented with a bibliography or “buyer’s guide” for assembling a suitable home library. Whether appearing in books or magazines (such as Hamilton Wright Mabie’s influential column in *Ladies’ Home Journal*), “reading advice,” saturated with ideologies and anxieties of self-education, filled in the discursive spaces between the presumably higher-order cultural criticism offered by genteel literary magazines and the elementary literacy instruction provided by schools.

Ultimately, Nila Smith’s proclamation—“We are surrounded with reading materials on every side”—takes on added resonance when we consider that much of these “reading materials” were, like Smith’s own book, about reading. Authors from a wide variety of institutional, professional, and disciplinary positions wrote about reading as a physiological, psychological, sociological, commercial, cultural, and historical practice. And yet, only a small subset of this highly self-conscious “culture of print”—often the most obviously literary or literary-adjacent

portion—has been taken up by literary historians of this period, leaving a vast body of materials unexamined, materials that nevertheless played an instrumental role in shaping discourses on reading. In “Making U.S. Readers,” I argue that in order to understand what “reading” and “being a reader” meant in this period, we must recover and reassess how unliterary, mundane, mass-cultural textual materials taught, enabled, proscribed, and portrayed “reading” as a practice of self-authoring and “being a reader” as a mode of identity for their broad and varied audiences. The materials that I analyze in following chapters—standardized reading tests, beginning reading primers for illiterate adults, newspaper book reviews, and library publicity campaigns—all emerged as products of the period’s specific institutionalized print culture and helped to install and enforce now-commonplace ideas about how reading signifies as a social and cultural practice in the modern United States.

Methods and Theoretical Frames

Following in the influential footsteps of Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Janice A. Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* (1997), scholars of the early twentieth century have learned to look outside of traditional literary canons for sources that provide a more prismatic view of the period’s “culture of print.” These fruitful challenges to the hegemony of literary modernism have drawn their energy and evidence from the types of institutional sites of reading mentioned above. Radway’s work on the Book of the Month Club provides an instructive model for this type of work, as she investigates how a few key figures behind a particular cultural institution set an intellectual and commercial agenda that reflected and responded to both the structural realities of the marketplace for books and “the variegated promises and pleasures of reading” (8). Likewise, June Howard’s *Publishing the Family* (2001) and Blair’s *Reading Up* (2012) offer histories that account in nuanced ways for the material,

commercial, intellectual, and affective pressures that shaped two different magazine-based literary projects, while Elizabeth Renker bases her investigation into the institutionalization of “American literature” in the changing curricular mandates and hierarchies of secondary schools and universities. All of these studies share an investment in uncovering the cultural and ideological production of “literature,” specifically as it emerges in middle-class, middlebrow institutional spaces: a commercial book club, genteel publications, and universities. My work is deeply indebted to this approach, but instead of focusing on literature or literary institutions directly, I adopt a wider-angled, more oblique view onto the “literary” by pursuing the cultural and ideological production of “reading” in its many broader senses. This adjustment in focus has led me to sources from different registers of the “culture of print,” materials that may not have any direct connection to “literature” and are, in fact, more often studied in other fields. Nevertheless, I argue throughout that sources as diverse as educational assessment tools and thoroughly middlebrow book reviews all have something to contribute to a “literary history” of this period, not because they are ancillary to or separate from more self-consciously literary projects of the period, but because they similarly instruct their readers then and historians now in the forms of desire associated with being—and being seen as—a reader.

Guided by this interest in the ways in which reading practices and forms of identification around reading have signified differently across communities of readers in the past, my project aligns with the questions and methods of scholarship housed under the interdisciplinary heading of “the history of reading.” Work in this field shares two basic premises: one, that “reading itself has changed over time” (Darnton, “What is the History of Books?” 131), and two, that “reading is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits” (Chartier, *Order* 3). Historians of reading tend to seek out evidence that offers a broad sense of the social, material, and ideological

conditions that have shaped the “social context of reading” (Darnton, “What is” 132) in different times and places (e.g., literacy statistics, library records, booksellers’ or publishers’ catalogs), as well as evidence that speaks more directly to the practices and experiences of individual or small groups of readers (e.g., marginalia, diary entries and correspondence, book club minutes and reports). The specificity of many of these reconstructive projects offers an important corrective to the disembodied “reader” of “reader response theory” while still acknowledging, as Mary Kelley writes, that “individuals read *in* and *with* a text” (“Books and Lives” 195, *emph. in orig.*). My approach borrows the mixed methods of work in the history of reading, combining an attentiveness to the material history of new or overlooked sources with close textual analysis.

“Making U.S. Readers” builds from the premises of the history of reading by asking how texts circulating in specific institutional environments in the early twentieth century United States attempted to coordinate the beliefs and behaviors of specific subjects on the topic of reading. Because I am interested in reading and being a reader as mass phenomena, I explore these questions through mundane institutional documents, rather than more personal forms of evidence of reading. Not only are these types of materials a pervasive and under-examined part of this period’s “culture of print,” but such documents may also help move the study of historical readers beyond the usual binaristic models that have traditionally shaped the field. Here, I draw on the work of Christine Pawley, who has theorized institutions and organizations as constituting a “middle layer of analysis” in the history of reading that can “bridge the gap between structure and agency and between macro and micro views” (“Beyond Market Models” 74). Pawley positions herself as a mediator between two traditional models for thinking about reading—Darnton’s “communications circuit” and de Certeau’s “reading as poaching”—each of which is prone to a different type of reductivism: where Darnton’s circuit tends to subordinate individual

readers to structural economic factors (74-78), de Certeau's poaching tends to valorize all acts of reading as acts of resistance against structural oppression (78-79). Looking to "institutional sites of reading," Pawley argues, can provide a more robust means of understanding how anonymous individual readers—such as those that constituted the new mass readership of the early twentieth century—interacted with the complex print culture of their time.

The robustness of Pawley's model for institutional reading comes from both its broad applicability and its room for particularity. While very few real readers leave archival traces of their reading, almost no readers can claim to be untouched by formal and informal institutions and organizations: as Geoff Hall reminds us, "Reading is always by definition schooled to some degree. There can be no innocent unschooled reading" (336). While I do not necessarily take "the institution" as my unit of analysis (something that Pawley, as a library historian, models in her own work), I am nonetheless interested in the phenomenon of "the institutional reader," the reader whose relationship to reading and writing is conditioned by—and therefore recoverable through—institutionally-specific orientations to print. Examining different institutional sites of reading thus provides a means of getting closer to the elusive figure of the "general reader" (who is always "institutional") while still maintaining a sense of particularity. Along these lines, an institutional model of reading can also account for how reading mediates communal relationships without recourse to the vagueness or even quasi-mysticism of other models of reading as "imagined community."¹⁸ The material forms of "schooling" that I examine in the pages to come helped millions of people understand themselves as "readers" who belonged to specific

¹⁸ Anderson's paradigmatic theory of the nation as an "imagined community" enabled by the spread of "print capitalism" relies on an argument about reading: scattered across space and time, individuals can nevertheless feel a sense of belonging to a nation by reading the same texts (notably, the novel and the newspaper). As a recent critique of Anderson, Loughran is instructive for her focus on the material eccentricities and instabilities of the "print capitalism" of the early republic and nineteenth-century United States. Loughran shows how material texts circulating in sub-national networks can reinforce (rather than erase) forms and feelings of local (rather than national) allegiance, introducing hiccups into Anderson's romanticized model of nation-building (5-14).

communities of many different sizes and scales. From the hyper-locality of reading primers designed with the needs of just a few hundred students in mind, to the tense balance between region and nation negotiated by Midwestern newspaper book reviews, to the national forms of exceptionalism circulated by standardized tests and wartime library publicity—each set of institutional materials featured in my chapters attempts to use reading to instantiate different bounds of inclusion *and* exclusion.¹⁹ Recovering these intermediary forms of community-making-through-reading can help us recover the multiple imaginative pathways that connected or barred the individual “reader” from more abstract forms of belonging, most notably the American nation.

I also see my work extending the field of the history of reading—especially for literary historians—by consciously decentering acts of textual interpretation from definitions of reading. Chapter 2’s focus on “illiterate readers” does this work most explicitly, but each chapter considers to some extent how “reading” was constituted as a practice that went well beyond the bounds of a text. In this respect, I am following Leah Price’s recent work on “non-reading,” what she cheekily terms “rejection [rather than reception] history.” In *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012), Price identifies the over-privileging of textual interpretation in both book history and literary studies as a major impediment to truly understanding the social lives of books: “In both camps, though, an investment in textual interpretation that runs as deep among intellectual historians as among literary critics has distracted both from the wide range of nontextual and sometimes even noninterpretive (which doesn’t mean noninterpretable) uses to

¹⁹ Kaestle and Radway name this dynamic as a central part of the “culture of print,” as “the tensions between social integration and disintegration, between order and disorder, and between incorporation and diversity were themselves played out with the indispensable assistance of proliferating print practices and reading formations” (“A Framework” 15). Alice Fahs, gesturing toward Benedict Anderson, makes a similar claim about literature and reading during the Civil War: “If print culture can produce fictive affective bonds, it can equally produce imagined differences. [...] Then as now, print capitalism worked in a complex dynamic of consolidation and differentiation, with drives toward homogeneity offset by countervailing drives toward distinction” (*Imagined Civil War* 9).

which the book is put” (20). Price’s corrective is to shift our focus to representations of non-reading in Victorian Britain, which are nevertheless deeply imbricated with ideologies that elevate reading and text (that is, the intellectual content of books) over non-reading and books (that is, their material dimensions). By examining how Victorians portrayed books’ materiality, their embedded and elicited forms of labor, and their circulation, Price claims, we can deepen our understanding of the values that have been assigned to reading.

Like Price, I am also concerned with “not a particular kind of reading so much as the primacy of reading itself,” the ways in which ideas about reading—and even the word “reading”—have a tendency to drift into other forms and usages to structure social relationships (21).²⁰ The non-fiction, non-literary sources that provide the basis for this dissertation’s case studies each engage with “the primacy of reading itself” in a range of ways, and throughout, I am ultimately less interested in reconstructing how these sources were actually read than in analyzing how these sources taught their users how to think and feel about reading. I take cues from previous studies such as Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* or Blair’s *Reading Up*, which similarly examine what we could call instructional materials that teach forms of desire as much as textual practices. My close analysis likewise considers both the types of textual practices that the sources invite, discourage, enable, and foreclose, as well as the social meanings attached to these practices. The few individual readers that do appear in my case studies—the test-taking students in Chapter 1, John Wolden in Chapter 2, and to some extent Fanny Butcher in Chapter 3—serve as examples of how ideas about reading might manifest in a suite of both textual and non-textual strategies that are lumped together under the name of “reading” and embodied in a figure called a “reader.”

²⁰ Price offers many examples of this “metaphoric drift” in which the word “reading” is used to describe non-textual interpretive acts (e.g., “reading” a shirt for lice) (21-22).

An approach to the history of reading that deemphasizes individual acts of textual interpretation has the further benefit of opening the field's gaze onto readers that are not typically represented in traditional archives of reader response.²¹ A central irony seems to permeate most work in the history of reading: while the field has always sought to tell the history of "ordinary" readers, the fact remains that readers who leave traces of their practices are, because they are so rare, extraordinary. Typical evidence of individual and group acts of reading thus tells a history that disproportionately privileges literacy practices that resemble academics' disciplinary understandings of reading as active, engaged, textual interpretation. In no way do I mean to discount work that has fought against historical, contemporary, and archival silences to restore the intellectual spaces and practices of marginalized groups of readers—for example, in historical studies, women and African Americans who sought intellectual communities beyond what was traditionally allowed to them,²² or, in contemporary studies, those who engage with discounted genres such as romance, true crime, or book club selections.²³ Instead, I point out this trend merely to suggest that in focusing on readers whose practices resemble our own, we may be missing other ways in which behaviors and practices that are also called "reading" (but may be less oriented toward meaning-making) form part of the history of what it means to be a reader. For a period such as the early twentieth century United States, when readership—and discourses on reading—expanded in uneven and unexpected ways, it seems imperative to acknowledge these other types of investments in reading. We can examine how reading signified not only by looking for individual readers' reflections on reading, but also by recovering the conceptual infrastructure that freighted reading with multiple meanings.

²¹ Again Price provides a model for this, as her focus on materiality and circulation allows her to breach the lines of class that would traditionally limit the scope of studies of reading in Victorian Britain (13).

²² See Kelley, *Private Woman*; Sicherman; McHenry.

²³ See Radway, *Reading the Romance*; Sweeney; Long.

Therefore, while Darnton's original caveat about the study of the history of reading—that “the inner experience of ordinary readers may always elude us”—is undoubtedly true, I resist the urge to turn his words into either a research program that single-mindedly seeks these inner experiences or a lament for their inevitable loss (“What Is” 132). In fact, I argue, in the context of the early twentieth century United States, the “inner experience of ordinary readers” may not be as important as the externalized, socialized behaviors and attitudes associated with being seen as a reader. To privilege only the inner experience of reading is to ignore the very real ways in which external readerly behaviors of all types—from excelling at a standardized test to spending time in an army camp library to conforming to social norms of hygiene and behavior as they are presented in books—signified in the broader social world in ways that had little to do with textual interpretation. I insist that the historically specific meanings given to “reading” as an abstraction are crucial components of any history of reading as a textual practice.

Rather than any specific reading practice, my ultimate object of analysis is the larger meaning of the term *reader*. The case studies assembled in this dissertation provide windows onto specific contexts in which the idea of “becoming a reader” is self-consciously taken up, applied, contested, or theorized. Who counts as a reader? Who decides who counts as a reader? What personal, political, and ethical work does becoming or being a reader entail? What material, textual, or (non-)interpretive practices signify as those of a reader? By posing these questions about “reading” as an always-social practice and “reader” as an always-social subject position, I follow Michael Warner's call to attend to “the nuances by which reading practices are embedded within and organized by ethical projects for cultivating one kind of person or another” (19). The specific kind of person that the materials of my dissertation aimed to cultivate could be called—and usually is called—simply a “reader,” but as I show, the meaning of this label is

never simple, nor are the choices, desires, and labors required of someone who wishes to go by this name.

Today, thanks in large part to decades of scholarship built upon both sociological theories of taste (in particular, Pierre Bourdieu's work) and ethnographic methods for recuperating so-called "uncritical" forms of textual practice (such as those of Radway and Elizabeth Long), it is difficult to imagine "reading" or "being a reader" as having anything *but* contingent and multiple meanings. And yet, this acknowledgment of reading's multiplicity has not lessened the perceived stakes of being—and being seen as—a particular type of reader. We continue to use conversations about readers and reading as indices for other concerns such as class and education, gender and self-actualization, politics and empathy, or citizenship and participatory democracy. These conversations all rely on a deep-seated, long-since-naturalized faith in the ability of "reading" to tell us something about people and communities. Furthermore, the notion of "being a reader" continues to be invoked as a shorthand for a particularly desirable mode of subjectivity, one that entails a specific set of practices, behaviors, and relationships to cultural and political power. Most studies of contemporary readers and reading groups are full of moments in which subjects are reported to claim the identity "reader" in order to represent themselves in empowered ways to a world that has confined them to the social and intellectual margins.²⁴ We can see how these ideas have also come to structure scholarly investigations themselves, as in this description of the contemporary "reading class" from sociologist Wendy Griswold:

²⁴ Long, for example, describes how one book club member that she observes reports, "The group affirms me as a woman who thinks," using her membership in a book club to speak back to unaffirming structures in her life (111). Similarly, Farr recounts an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which Oprah tells her audience members of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, "Once you accomplish reading this book, then you are a *bona fide* certified reader," a trenchant example of how Oprah positioned her book club as a gateway for its members onto other (higher) forms of cultural capital (41).

Today, the prospects for reading are not bright. Most people in advanced industrial and post-industrial countries are not and will not be readers. Although they read for work and for information, routinely and matter-of-factly, they entertain themselves with electronic media. Only a few get lost in a book, turn to newspapers for news and magazines for leisure, and are called ‘readers’ by their family and friends. (36-37)

The richness of Griswold’s perhaps inadvertent contradiction—“will not be readers. Although they read”—cuts to the quick of the problem at the heart of this dissertation. If reading alone does not make someone a reader, then what does? Griswold’s answer to this dilemma is, of course, specific to the first decade of the twenty-first century, but it follows a pattern that I will trace in the first decades of the twentieth century. “Being a reader” involves *some* textual practices (“getting lost in a book,” using newspapers and magazines for both information and “leisure”), but not *all* textual practices: to “read for work and for information, routinely and matter-of-factly,” for example, is insufficient in Griswold’s definition. More important, perhaps, are the social aspects of “being a reader,” being recognized by “family and friends” as a member of a group that is by definition exclusionary and narrow. Griswold declares of the “reading class,” “Not everyone who can read is a member,” a fact that immediately raises questions about who draws these limits and why (37). “Making U.S. Readers in the Early Twentieth Century” asks such questions of an earlier time in the hopes that some of the answers might help us understand the lingering forms of desire and social belonging that are continually mapped onto reading.

Chapter Synopses

The first two chapters of my dissertation take the idea of “making readers” quite literally by examining explicitly pedagogical materials. Chapter 1, “‘Do what it says to do’: Standardized Reading and Silent Reading Tests,” starts with the earliest moments in a typical reader’s life—primary school—and examines an instrument of readerly management that is still in use today: the standardized silent reading test. I trace the trial-and-error processes by which educators and researchers in the 1910s and 1920s attempted to isolate, measure, and standardize “silent reading” among the largest generation of public school children that U.S. schools had ever reached. In the course of measuring reading, test makers circulated a very specific idea of how reading works: their tests relied on the assumption that certain texts are so self-evident that their meanings could be apprehended without any interpretive interference. By further incentivizing these “right,” self-evident readings by labeling the “wrong” types of reading as “deficient” or “socially deviant,” standardized tests and the silent reading pedagogies they subsequently engendered taught millions of new U.S. readers that to read well—that is, to score well on a reading test—was to belong in the classroom, school, and society. While the invention of “reading comprehension” has been addressed by historians of education and literacy, it has been wholly ignored as a watershed moment in reading history by scholars working in more literary-historical modes. My chapter insists that any history of twentieth-century reading must reckon with the indelible social and ideological effects of the idea of “standardized reading,” as all subsequent ideas of reading—especially interpretive reading—inevitably respond to the mandates established and circulated by these early standardized tests.

Chapter 2, “‘What a farmer reads shows in his farm’: Learning to be Literate with Adult Reading Primers,” considers another site of early reading instruction that similarly aimed to

produce a standardized reader. However, the readers in my second chapter are a very different—and almost completely forgotten—population: illiterate adults. As a faceless collective noun, “illiterates” haunted newspaper headlines and government reports throughout the 1910s and 1920s, often as a shibboleth for nativist or racist politics. This chapter examines the efforts of one pioneering adult educator, Cora Wilson Stewart (1875-1958), who worked with evangelical vigor to reach the “illiterates” in her home state of Kentucky and “emancipate” them into literacy. Stewart’s reading primers, the main texts for this chapter, are a rare type of beginning reading text, as they were specifically designed for use by native-born, English-speaking, white adults. By reading Stewart’s textbooks not for how they teach reading, but for how they teach their students to *feel* about reading, I recover a brutally honest set of lessons: that literacy is not so much reading ability as it is performance, and that illiteracy signifies well outside the margins of printed or written pages. As carefully observed depictions of the ways in which reading and writing are signifiers of middle-class whiteness and its attendant privileges of citizenship and power, Stewart’s primers may seem unremarkable in terms of their ideological content. My interest in these primers stems, instead, from their exceptional candor, as they provide rare historical evidence of usually-unspoken assumptions about the social meanings of literacy—evidence intended for the eyes and ears of those very “illiterates” who found themselves on the wrong side of these assumptions. Stewart’s primers, along with other primers intended for adult beginning readers, allow us to approach the insidious “literacy myth” from a radically different point of view: that of someone who desperately wants to believe in its meaning. The evidence gained through this new approach helps add to our understanding of what makes this myth so alluring and enduring. Like the standardized tests examined in Chapter 1, Stewart’s primers

provide valuable evidence of the implicit socializing processes specific to the early twentieth century United States that accompanied more explicit lessons in reading.

While Chapters 1 and 2 focus on a person's first moments of becoming a reader, Chapters 3 and 4 look at more figurative moments of readerly creation. Both chapters consider how the daily newspaper provided a platform for the publication—and, in Chapter 4, publicization—of ideas about reading to a burgeoning population looking to make meaning out of an increasingly ordinary practice. Chapter 3, “‘To guide the right readers to the right books’: Newspaper Book Reviews and Typologies of Ordinary Reading,” turns to a ubiquitous form of commentary on literary culture that has received almost no direct scholarly attention: the newspaper book review. As opposed to their more stable and recognizably “literary” counterparts in magazines, newspapers book reviews were spaces of endless reinvention and experimentation in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their variety, quantity, and anonymity make newspaper book reviews seem like no more than speculative, indirect evidence of historical reading practices. However, I use this chapter to tease out a common feature from a variety of newspaper book reviews: a reliance on a typological understanding of reading, readers, and texts that, I argue, helped to manage reviews' varied readership by offering this audience different models of being a reader. In a survey of newspaper book reviews from the period and in a specific case study of one prolific reviewer—Fanny Butcher (1888-1987) of the *Chicago Tribune*—I show how, in the generic typology of newspaper book reviews, a place of privilege is held for the chimerical figure of “the ordinary reader,” who could turn to such reviews for a deeply ambivalent type of cultural instruction. Poised between journalism and criticism, reviewers reported on a version of “literary culture” that seemed awesomely distant and extraordinary, all the while undercutting this notion of literariness by validating the knowledge, experience, and influence of ordinary

readers. According to the imaginative landscape outlined by book reviews, the ordinary reader is invited, as Butcher would write, to “march in the parade and see it too”—the ultimate model of observation/participation that crystallizes the twinned desires that all of my chapters trace: reading to stand out and reading to fit in. In their typological lessons, intended for a uniquely varied audience, newspaper book reviews helped many types of readers understand themselves as “ordinary readers,” as crucial (if wholly imaginary) agents in a complex and changing literary field. While they lack the disciplinary framework of a standardized test or the affective weight of an illiterate’s reading primer, these reviews nonetheless compel a certain imaginative obedience from their readers.

My fourth and final chapter, “‘A reading army as no army ever was before’: The American Library Association’s Campaign for Books and Reading in World War I,” examines a specific episode in which the ordinary reader of Chapter 3 is pressed into service by the extraordinary circumstances of total war. While World War I has long been studied as a turning point in cultural histories of this period, I use this chapter to consider how the war may inflect a twentieth-century-American history of reading. As part of U.S. war efforts in 1917–1918, the American Library Association (ALA) collected over \$5 million and ten million books and magazines to provide reading materials to soldiers and sailors at home and abroad. This chapter examines the publicity materials that powered this nation-wide campaign for books and reading: special bulletins and internal memoranda meant to mobilize local libraries, press releases and “human interest stories” aimed to win over the general public, and signs and pamphlets designed to lure soldiers into ALA-operated camp libraries. This body of materials, most of which have been ignored or underanalyzed by previous histories of the ALA, arguably constitutes one of the first ever mass-mediated, institutionally-backed publicity campaigns for reading. As I show in

my own reading of these materials, the ALA's appeals for support hinged on the figure of the "soldier-reader," a uniquely masculine reader who used libraries, books, and reading to become a better soldier, a better man, and a better American. In the ALA's images and anecdotes about servicemen making the choice to read, even—or rather, especially—under the duress of war, I show how this publicity campaign pressed "reading" into a paradoxical service: to affirm American exceptionalism in alignment with the aims of the war and to allay war's ruptures and traumas in the service of humanitarian peace. As with the materials of the previous three chapters, the ALA's campaign for books and reading presented the identity of "reader" as an attractive and available option to new groups of people in new ways.

In a brief concluding section, I draw together points of connection and mutual themes among my four case studies. Above all, "Making U.S. Readers" shows that "reading" in the early twentieth century United States was conceived of and implemented as a powerful form of sociality. "Being a reader" was, at its heart, an act of identification: readers at all levels of literacy were taught to recognize other readers by a host of textual and non-textual habits, attitudes, and behaviors. Conversely, as readers identified—and identified with—each other, they were also instructed in ways to stay vigilant against non-readers and the perceived threat that non-reading posed to a readerly social order. One of the primary affordances of the institutional sites of reading explored in this project is the view they offer of the dynamics of this recognition and dis-identification—a reminder that a history of reading is incomplete if we do not also consider how non-reading has inflected and even enabled both positive and negative ideas about the social aspects of reading. I end by considering how the project of twenty-first-century literary scholars is also one of "making readers," an acknowledgment that can help us situate our practices and pedagogies in continuity with earlier projects.

Chapter 1

“Do what it says to do”:

Standardized Reading and Silent Reading Tests

In October 1913, hoping to stay abreast of the latest in educational “fads,” the principals of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) voted to form three new investigatory committees: one on open-air schools, one on organized play at recess, and one on standardized tests. The tests in question, the *Courtis Arithmetic Tests*, had been developed a few years earlier by Stuart A. Courtis, a teacher at the Liggett School for Girls in Detroit and an ascendant star among educational efficiency experts. Promising to diagnose “the weakness of every child” so that teachers might “plan work which will overcome the weakness in a systematic manner,” the Courtis tests offered the school system a new means of managing student and teacher performance (“Principals to Prepare”). A year and a half later, in April 1915, the verdict on Courtis’s tests appeared to be in, as the *Detroit Free Press* reported that the Board of Education had enthusiastically endorsed Courtis’s “‘fad’ teaching.” Invoking Henry Ford—Detroit’s other, more famous prophet of scientific efficiency—Assistant Superintendent Charles L. Spain and school board Inspector Albert E. Sherman proclaimed that Courtis and his new Department of Educational Research²⁵ could save DPS and the taxpayers who supported it \$250,000 a year (“School Officials Laud”).

The taxpayers, however—as well as other school board members—appeared to be much more skeptical of Courtis and his fads. A day after the *Free Press*’s story on the school board’s

²⁵ Courtis was appointed head of the Department of Educational Research in April 1914, to take effect in September of the same year (*Proceedings of the Board of Education, Detroit, 1913–1914* 326).

endorsement of Courtis, a concerned parent wrote in to rebut the efficiency expert's claims. The school district had gone "mad with efficientitis," the parent wrote, which was effectively robbing school children of their childhood: "Is the everlasting prod of the stop watch expert to hurry our little ones through their happy years?" ("Opposes Speeding Up"). (Similar charges would be repeated in September 1915, when another angry letter-writer would blame "Mr. Courtis's stop-watch system of education" for "producing a generation of nervous wrecks" ["Opposes School Fads"]). In May, the *Free Press* ran a story on teachers' concerns that the Courtis tests were "breeding dishonesty among the pupils," as students might be driven to cheat on exams by the pressures to secure higher scores ("Do Courtis Tests"). In July, five school board inspectors launched a formal effort to depose Courtis on the grounds of financial dishonesty: not only was Courtis drawing an annual salary of \$3,000, but he was also using free data from Detroit schools to fine-tune his exam materials, which he then sold *back* to DPS for his own profit.²⁶ Debate over Courtis raged through the next school year, as disgruntled school board members tried unsuccessfully to slash the budget to Courtis's Department of Educational Research. In the end, Courtis kept his job thanks to a narrow June 1916 school board vote, but the episode had done more than enough to show how educators, administrators, and parents weighed the personal, financial, pedagogical, and philosophical costs of the fad of standardized testing.²⁷

With the benefit of one hundred years' hindsight, we know now that standardized testing was no fad, but in fact became a deeply ingrained aspect of twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. education. Courtis, who began developing his tests in 1907, was among the vanguard of an

²⁶ Courtis also ran testing programs for other large public school districts, including in the city of Boston and the state of New York. See Courtis's own "History of Courtis Tests" in *Manual of Instructions for Giving and Scoring the Courtis Standard Tests in the Three R's* (1914), as well as Johanninger.

²⁷ For the whole Courtis saga, see *Free Press's* coverage in the articles "Inspectors," "Courtis Set," "Efficiency Expert," "Budget Cut," "Courtis Retention," and "Board Votes," listed in the bibliography below.

educational assessment movement that would explode in the 1910s and 1920s. In addition to the arithmetic tests that were at the heart of the DPS debate, Curtis also developed tests in composition, reading, spelling, writing, geography, handwriting, and music. By 1925, he had sold 13 million tests to schools in nearly every state—a remarkable feat, given how crowded the market for school tests was becoming (Johanningmeier 203-204). The World Book Company (who published Curtis’s practice exam series) released a *Bibliography of Tests for Use in Schools* in 1921 that listed 278 different titles of tests and measurement scales in subjects ranging from general intelligence, common school subjects (e.g., reading, writing, history, math, and science), specialized training courses (e.g., business ability and home economics), and even “miscellaneous.” By 1939, when Gertrude H. Hildreth compiled a *Bibliography of Mental Tests and Rating Scales* for the Psychological Corporation, she counted 4,279 titles, many of them the proprietary assessment tools of city school districts or state boards of education. Predictably, as the tests proliferated, so did the public debate around them.²⁸ Nevertheless, schools and school districts found a vast array of uses for standardized tests as they classified, sorted, promoted, held back, diagnosed, and guided the children who took them (Chapman 153-63). With their wide distribution, veneer of objectivity, and rhetorics of personal and societal improvement, the teaching and assessment tools of the educational measurement movement were well-positioned to usher in wide-spread ideological changes at the lowest levels of the education system, no matter how hard critics tried to suppress them.

²⁸ One of the more famous public debates over testing was between journalist Walter Lippman and Stanford professor Lewis Terman (the developer of the Stanford Revision of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Test). In a series of articles and responses published in the *New Republic* in 1922, Lippman and Terman locked horns on the political and philosophical stakes of intelligence testing, and their debate solidified testing’s place as a controversial topic in public discourse (see Chapman 135-39; Willis 170-73).

Drawing energy from, on the one hand, the development of general intelligence testing and modern notions of mental ability,²⁹ and, on the other hand, the implementation of corporate structures and scientific-management strategies in classrooms, schools, and school districts,³⁰ the educational testing movement served as a crucible for many of this period's hottest ideological battles, the results of which would continue to shape education through the rest of the century. Consequently, cultural historians have long been interested in the personalities and politics of this moment. Most of these studies, whether in the form of biographies of testing pioneers such as Edward Thorndike and Lewis Terman, or of more general accounts of how measurement and assessment embedded themselves in the day-to-day structures of U.S. schools, present this moment as a watershed in the histories of disciplines such as psychology and education.³¹ Through the work of this chapter, I will argue that the birth of educational measurement also represents an as-yet-unappreciated milestone in the cultural history of reading, one that is easily overlooked because the readers involved—primary school students—do not often leave direct evidence of their reading. The standardized silent reading tests developed in this period present a materially dispersed yet ideologically consolidated archive of ideas about reading that shaped the early literacy practices, habits, and attitudes of a huge portion of new readers. More than the usual sources of histories of literary reading, standardized reading tests and the pedagogies they influenced were well-positioned to make mass-scale, programmatic interventions into the lives of

²⁹ See Carson for an exhaustive account of how general intelligence tests, especially Terman's 1916 revision of the Binet Simon IQ test, gave rise to the idea that merit as determined by tests of mental ability could serve as a seemingly objective means of social distinction in the early twentieth century U.S. See Chapman for a history of how Terman's tests found applications in schools. For accounts of specific implementations of intelligence tests in contexts outside of schools, see Kevles on army testing during WWI and Richardson on the use of mental tests at Ellis Island.

³⁰ See Tyack and Hansot, especially 152-167, for a history of the rise of corporate models of scientific research and management in education administration. For a more explicitly politicized view, see Callahan, who argues that schools are particularly susceptible to the efficiency principles of the business world because public funding structures for education make schools particularly vulnerable to outside critique.

³¹ See Joncich on Thorndike and Chapman on Lewis Terman; see Giordano for a more general history of the birth of the educational testing movement.

young readers across the United States. Studying these early tests from a literary historical point of view thus presents an opportunity to revisit a primal scene in the ideological development of many modern readers.

In investigating how standardized reading tests are carriers of ideologies about reading, I am building on the work of scholars of education and literacy, most directly Arlette Ingram Willis. Willis's book, *Reading Comprehension Research and Testing in the U.S.: Undercurrents of Race, Class, and Power in the Struggle for Meaning* (2008), offers an incisive history and analysis of this moment, as she argues that turn-of-the-century reading assessments continue to have a dangerously unquestioned influence on current understandings of reading comprehension in educational debates. Willis is most concerned with how reading comprehension tests and instructional materials helped to normalize the racism, classism, and sexism of their predominantly white, male authors, and her critiques are meant to raise alarms about the continued use of such assessment tools in classrooms today. As I look at many of the same materials as Willis, I take a slightly different and even broader approach: where Willis is primarily interested in the ideologies that have generated a particular understanding of "reading comprehension" in the context of educational history, I attempt to extend this line of thinking to suggest that "reading" itself—as a specific practice mandated and measured by these exams—takes on ideological meaning. Reading is not simply a vehicle for dominant ideologies, but becomes a dominant ideology itself. By extension, reading tests and the pedagogies they inspired taught readers how to use this idea of reading as a yardstick of personal aptitude, ability, and achievement in intellectual and social realms.

This chapter focuses specifically on standardized silent reading tests, which I argue played a formative yet under-analyzed role in shaping vernacular ideas about how reading works

in the early twentieth century. For the psychologists, teachers, and school administrators who developed tests and championed their use, silent reading was the one skill that could unlock all others: proficiency in any subject, from math to home economics, first required mastery of silent reading. Reading instructors were thus eager to know how well U.S. schools prepared students in this basic skill, and the 1910s and 1920s saw the development of dozens of assessment instruments and instructional methods designed to measure and guarantee the quantity and quality of the readers produced by U.S. schools. However, in the pursuit of an answer to a seemingly objective question about educational efficiency—how well are U.S. schoolchildren learning to read?—test makers actually faced a much more fundamental question about what they hoped to measure—what *is* reading? If reading was “the ability to get meaning from the printed page,” as one test maker put it, how could you develop a standardized measure of such ability (Kelly 63)? As a practice without a material product, how could silent reading be measured—or could it be measured at all?

As I explore the different approaches that test makers took to these questions, I tell the story of how a particular set of reading practices became codified and promulgated as the one type of reading worth learning. The first section of this chapter examines the very first silent reading tests designed for use in primary schools. Most of the tests I look at were developed in a short time span—between 1914 and 1920—and very much build on and critique the methods and conclusions of other tests. By describing the different types of question-and-answer formats of these tests, I trace the various strategies that test makers used to turn “silent reading ability” into a quantifiable object. Test makers tried—and repeatedly failed—to isolate “silent reading” from all the other mental and physiological processes activated by their tests. These failures revealed a fundamental truth about reading: that silent reading only yields a predictable, measurable product

if the readers tested share basic assumptions about how to process text, assumptions that could entail everything from the meanings of words to notions of right or wrong behaviors in social situations. The second section of this chapter explores what test makers did with this novel understanding of literacy. In their content and form, reading tests modeled and rewarded a particular set of textual practices that I call “standardized reading,” a type of reading that tests helped to associate with social, cultural, and economic forms of belonging. Do what the test said to do, and you could qualify as a reader; fail to do what the test asked, and you were branded as deficient and wrong. The third section of this chapter explores how tests and classroom pedagogies used various forms of statistical comparison, competition, and shame to enforce the boundaries of this new type of literacy, thereby constructing a narrative of reading-as-civic-belonging that resonated within and beyond the classroom walls. I end the chapter with a consideration of how the notion of “standardized reading” continues to inform the types of reading abilities that are taught, tested, and valued at all levels of literacy. As literary scholars wrestle with how to position our own professional “interpretive” practices *vis-a-vis* the “informational” reading practices increasingly demanded in primary and secondary education, we can turn to this earlier moment to understand how these different types of reading were invented and vested with meaning in the first place.

The Measure of Silence

Silent reading has a long history,³² but for many educators in the first decades of the twentieth century, no other time in history seemed quite as ready for silent reading as their time.

³² Walter Ong, in *Orality and Literacy* (1982/2002), offers a version of the now-canonical argument that print enabled new forms of privacy that, in turn, encouraged a shift from reading aloud to solitary silent reading. While others have challenged the strict connection between print and silent reading by citing examples of silent reading in antiquity (see Gilliard and Saenger), typical histories of reading argue, as Chartier states, “By the fifteenth century silent reading was the norm” (“Practical Impact of Writing” 164).

In his 1921 book, *Silent Reading: With Special Reference to Methods for Developing Speed*, John Anthony O'Brien, a psychologist and Catholic priest at the Bureau of Educational Research at the University of Illinois, declared, "The plain facts are that the occasions requiring oral exhibition from either the adult or the pupil are notoriously few in life." He continues:

Practically all the reading of the average person is done silently. He reads the newspaper, the magazine, the scientific journal, the novel, not for purposes of oral display, but for the sole purpose of gathering the thoughts and ideas contained therein. (21)

O'Brien expressed a commonly-held belief that silent reading was the form of reading most appropriate to modern American life. Nila Smith, whose silent reading manual opened the introduction to this dissertation, offers a similar assessment of silent reading's suitability to modernity. Reading in the United States, according to Smith's schematic history, had entered into a new phase in the twentieth century. Whereas early American reading had a "religious emphasis" in which "the only motive for learning to read was that one might find out the Word of God for oneself" (3), and nineteenth-century American reading emphasized "the eloquent *oral* reading of *patriotic* selections" by a literate few to the illiterate masses (5, *emph. in orig.*), modern American reading has "a new emphasis, that of teaching *silent* reading of *all kinds of materials* and for a great *variety of purposes*" (6, *emph. in orig.*).³³ Smith even goes so far as to compare silent reading to another transformative technology of the period—the automobile—as both silent reading and cars "meet the needs of our times" for "faster and better methods" (13). In their insistence on the modernity of silent reading, Smith and O'Brien represent the large group of educators in this period who sought to teach effective silent reading in U.S. primary schools.

³³ Smith would elaborate on this history in a full-length monograph, *American Reading Instruction: Its Development and Its Significance in Gaining a Perspective on Current Practices in Reading* (1934).

The shift to silent reading pedagogy from older models of oral reading (recitation) dates to the educational reforms of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. While reading primers and teaching manuals had included elements of explicit instruction in silent reading from as early as around 1815, most nineteenth century reading primers and pedagogies “considered the reading process incomplete unless it culminated in expressive reading” (Robinson et al. 10). As a 1924 history of U.S. educational reform states the case, “The children’s business was to learn and to recite; that of the teachers to expound and to appraise; and the function of the training given was supposed to be preparation for living” (*Then and Now* 18). The authors’ “supposed to be” reveals how suspicious the educational community had grown of these more traditional teaching methods, especially in the wake of pragmatist and populist reimaginings of public education. By the 1880s, educators began to formally move away from recitation, emphasizing instead a “thought-getting model” of reading: under this model, reading was a means of *silent* communication by which the reader could gather meaning from a text (Robinson et al. 48-50).³⁴ From then on, aided by the increasing professionalization of education and educational research, which in turn led to more standardized curricula in schools across the country, reading instruction consolidated more and more behind strategies for explicitly teaching silent reading. By the 1920s, when Smith and O’Brien wrote their books, silent reading ability was by and large the desired end product of primary school literacy instruction because silent reading was considered a practical skill for students entering any of the broad variety of vocations in the modern world.³⁵

³⁴ Robinson et al. call the “thought-getting model” “a revolutionary perception of reading” (51).

³⁵ The authors of the introductory essay to the 1925 *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* write of silent reading, “As a means of gaining information and pleasure, it is essential in every content subject, such as history, geography, arithmetic, science, and literature” (1).

The rise of silent reading in U.S. education overlapped with the rise of the educational research and measurement movement, which attempted to apply empirical methods of scientific research to educational processes in order to address perceived inefficiencies in the system. In her history of educational research, Ellen Lagemann points to the survey work of Joseph Mayer Rice in the 1890s, who, by visiting schools across the country and administering tests, found that “most schools were failing to do their jobs well” (79). While Rice’s findings were initially met with resistance, by the 1910s, it was axiomatic among school administrators that surveying the “efficiency” of schools was the only way to safeguard against critiques such as Rice’s (Lagemann 80). To measure school efficiency, administrators required survey and assessment tools, and developers of standardized tests provided such tools. With the institutional support of graduate programs dedicated to educational research and testing—most notably the Teachers College (Columbia University) and Stanford University, where Edward L. Thorndike and Lewis M. Terman, respectively, mentored a generation of graduate students³⁶—standardized achievement and intelligence tests proliferated (Lagemann 88). In much the same way that silent reading became associated with ideas of modernity, seemingly objective measurements of educational processes and outcomes also signaled a new era (for better or for worse) in U.S. education.

However, silent reading posed a particular challenge to the educational measurement community: what aspects of silent reading could you measure? For some school subjects, particularly those with clearly right and wrong answers such as spelling or arithmetic, developing tests to measure student aptitude and teacher effectiveness was straightforward; unsurprisingly,

³⁶ Willis describes a “genealogy of reading comprehension research” that stems largely from the work of Thorndike (89).

math and spelling were among the first subjects to inspire standardized assessments.³⁷ Even subjects whose assessment seemed to require more subjective judgment, such as composition, handwriting, drawing, or even sewing, would at least yield a material product that could literally be held up to a scale (fig. 1.1).³⁸ In all cases, developing the scale was the process that required hard work, as researchers collected, analyzed, and normalized the subjective judgments of as many experts as possible in order to generate a standard scale.³⁹ But measuring silent reading ability was a different matter entirely. Instruction in silent reading did not produce “a tangible objective product which can be scrutinized and measured” (Burgess 77). This fact posed a serious challenge to the testing movement’s guiding empiricist dicta, “Whatever exists at all exists in some amount” and “To know it thoroughly involves knowing its quantity as well as its quality” (Thorndike “Nature” 16). Before educators could measure silent reading, they needed to precipitate some sort of by-product out of silent reading instruction. Silent reading tests, the bulk of which were developed between 1914 and 1920, promised to turn silent reading from an abstract practice into a tangible thing via a variety of different question-and-answer formats (table 1.1).

³⁷ J.M. Rice developed standardized lists of spelling test words in *The Rational Spelling Book* (1898) based on his research of over 33,000 students. Curtis’s previously mentioned *Standard Tests in Arithmetic* (1909) were the first widely-used math tests.

³⁸ Of the *Ayres Scale for Measuring the Quality of Handwriting* (1912), S.A. Curtis notes, “The Ayres scale should be stood vertical at arm’s length in front of the measurer” (*Manual* 88). Similarly, the *Hillegas Scale for English Composition* (1913) was marketed and sold as a wall hanging for classroom use so that both students and teachers could use the scale as a means of evaluation.

³⁹ Murdoch 13-31 provides a detailed example of this type of scale development for hand-sewing, as she breaks down and analyzes the many components (such as stitch length, knot size, and thread tension) that expert judges consider when assessing a piece of student sewing. Her work draws directly from Thorndike (under whom she studied at the Teachers College), who used similar methods to develop standardized scales for achievement in handwriting and drawing. On the topic of composition scales, see Elliott 40-43; Lewis.

Name	Date of first edition	Developer	Description of test
Courtis Standard Test in English	1914	S.A. Courtis, Department of Educational Research, Detroit Public Schools	Multi-part test: students copy letter forms, take dictation, compose an original story, reproduce a passage from silent reading; scores are generated for handwriting; composition; spelling, punctuation, and grammar; reading and writing speed and efficiency
Brown Silent Reading Test	1914	H.A. Brown, Bureau of Research, Department of Public Instruction, New Hampshire	Students read a short narrative passage, then reproduce as much of it as possible
Thorndike Reading Scale	1914	Edward L. Thorndike, Teachers College, New York	Multi-part test: students read words, short sentences, and short paragraphs; answers are verbal and non-verbal (e.g., marks, circles, underlines)
Starch Silent Reading Test	1914	Daniel Starch, University of Wisconsin	Students read a short narrative passage, then reproduce as much of it as possible; passages increase in length and complexity with each grade level
Kansas Silent Reading Tests	1916	Frederick J. Kelly, University of Kansas	Students read short questions, passages, and word puzzles; answers are verbal and non-verbal
Fordyce Scale	1916	Charles Fordyce, Teachers College, University of Nebraska	Students read a short passage, then answer a series of questions meant to test comprehension; students are also timed and scored on how much of the passage they can read in a set time
Monroe's Silent Reading Tests	1918	Walter S. Monroe, Bureau of Educational Measurement, Kansas State Normal School	Students read short questions, passages, and word puzzles; answers are verbal and non-verbal [Revision of Kelly's Kansas Silent Reading Test]
Haggerty Standard Educational Tests, Achievement Examination in Reading, Sigma 1	1920	M.E. Haggerty, College of Education, University of Minnesota	Multi-part test: students read and answer yes/no questions; students read instructions for modifying illustrations with non-verbal markings (e.g., crossing out, circling, drawing)
PS-1: A Picture Supplement Scale	1921	May Ayres Burgess, Russell Sage Foundation, New York	Students read instructions for modifying 20 illustrations with non-verbal markings

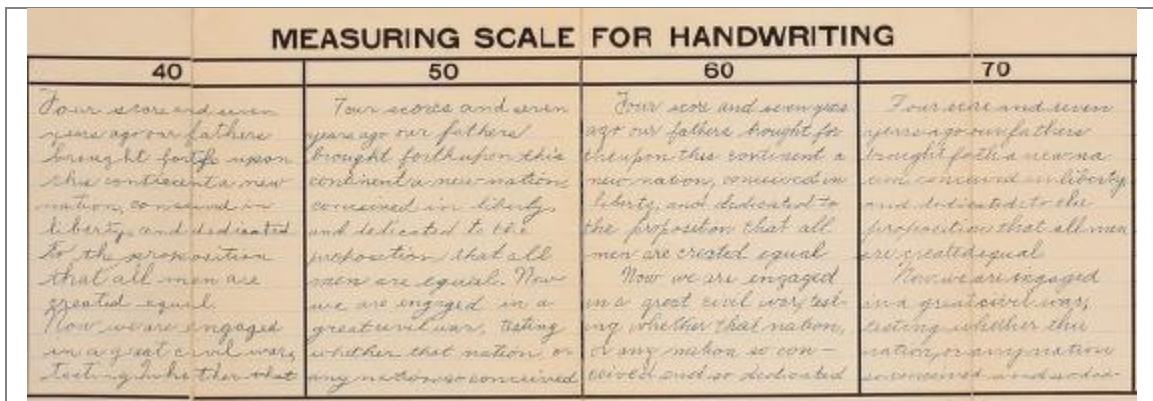
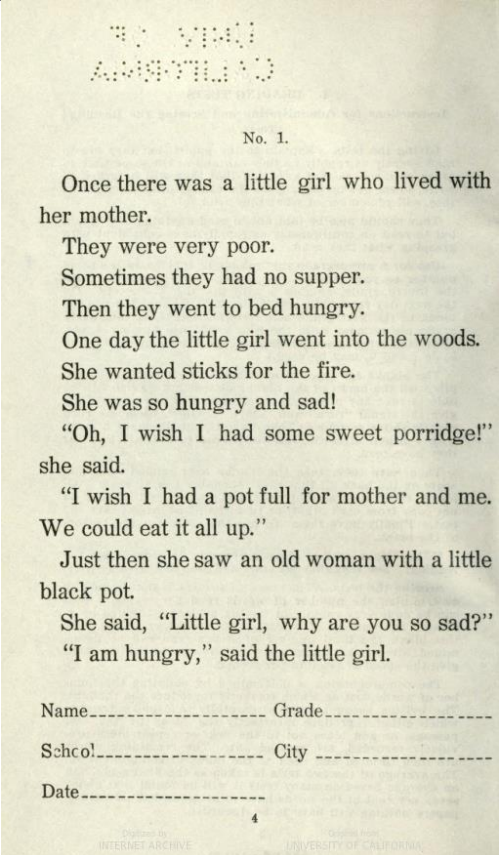


Fig. 1.1. Part of the Ayres *Handwriting Scale*. An instructor could hold a student's writing sample up to this fold-out scale and judge its relative merit. Courtesy of HathiTrust.

The first attempts to render the silent reading process as a “tangible objective product” suitable for measurement turned to reading’s close relative, writing. On what are now classified as reproduction tests, a student would read a passage silently, then attempt to reproduce the passage in writing.⁴⁰ This method is a clear analog of the recitation methods used by reading instructors in earlier years: “reading” is akin to a performance that can be assessed in terms of its accuracy and completeness, and each test set its own standard of what counts as accurate and complete. Some tests, such as the widely used *Starch Silent Reading Test* (1914), employed what would become known as the “word-counting” method (fig. 1.2), which (as its name suggests) involves counting “the number of words written which correctly reproduce the thought” of the passage (Starch 3). H.A. Brown’s *Silent Reading Test* (1916), on the other hand, was scored by the “idea-counting” method, in which the grader checked a student’s response against a list of the main ideas in the passage. “The Long Slide” passage on Brown’s test, for example, is roughly 2,000 words long and, according to the answer key, contains 40 distinct ideas (fig. 1.3). A student would earn a point for each idea that appeared in her written passage. By each scoring method, a student’s score was calculated by dividing the quantity of a passage’s words or ideas successfully reproduced by a known and constant whole number of words or ideas.

⁴⁰ Readence and Moore identify three general types of standard reading tests, “reproducing a passage, solving written puzzles, and answering questions,” and I have borrowed this framework from them (307). In the same article, the authors argue that question tests emerge as the most popular testing format due to early researchers’ emphasis on “objective and convenient measurements at the expense of providing a complete picture of students’ comprehending abilities,” adding that this emphasis on objectivity and convenience continues to dictate educational testing priorities today (307). While I agree with the spirit of their remarks, I do wonder how Readence and Moore would suggest designing a test to provide “a complete picture” of reading comprehension. I take the frustrations and compromises made by reading test developers to suggest that such a picture is actually impossible.

 <p style="text-align: center;">No. 1.</p> <p>Once there was a little girl who lived with her mother. They were very poor. Sometimes they had no supper. Then they went to bed hungry. One day the little girl went into the woods. She wanted sticks for the fire. She was so hungry and sad! “Oh, I wish I had some sweet porridge!” she said. “I wish I had a pot full for mother and me. We could eat it all up.” Just then she saw an old woman with a little black pot. She said, “Little girl, why are you so sad?” “I am hungry,” said the little girl.</p> <p>Name----- Grade----- School----- City----- Date-----</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">THE KEY.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Some children in the country attend school.</i> 2. <i>The schoolhouse is known as the Long Hill School.</i> 3. <i>It is situated on top of a long hill.</i> 4. <i>The pupils slide down hill once at recess in the winter.</i> 5. <i>One day a boy brought to school a new sled.</i> 6. <i>Hi uncle had given it to him.</i> 7. <i>He named it the Simoon.</i> 8. <i>He almost had a fight with another boy.</i> 9. <i>This boy said the name was foolish.</i> 10. <i>At recess the pupils went for a slide.</i> 11. <i>At the end of recess no pupils appeared.</i> 12. <i>The teacher was astonished and angry.</i> 13. <i>Nothing like this had ever happened before.</i> 14. <i>After a long wait no scholars appeared.</i> 15. <i>No one in passing teams had seen her school.</i> 16. <i>She stayed at school until closing time.</i> 17. <i>Then she went to the nearest neighbor.</i> 18. <i>His children were among the scholars.</i> [...] 39. <i>His was a mile and a half longer.</i> 40. <i>No one has coasted at recess since that day.</i>
<p>Fig. 1.2. Passage 1 from the <i>Starch Silent Reading Test</i>. Student responses were graded using the word-counting method (4). Courtesy of HathiTrust.</p>	<p>Fig. 1.3. Scoring Key for Brown’s <i>Silent Reading Test</i>, “The Long Slide,” using the idea-counting method. Important ideas are italicized (12).</p>

The seeming simplicity and objectivity of these early reproduction tests belie major flaws in their construction and scoring method. One error in the method was clear: the skill tested by such tests was not “reading” *per se*, but often memory and the ability to write quickly. In fact, a version of this flaw—testing something other than “reading”—would plague most silent reading tests, which struggled in general to adhere to the statistical mandate of the “Law of the Single Variable” for the obvious reason that “reading” always involves many variables. By the time she developed her silent reading test in 1921, May Ayres Burgess could use almost ten years’ worth of observations from earlier reading tests to enumerate all of the “controlling factors” that she needed to eliminate or at least hold constant in her exam:

To be eliminated
Complex thought
Abstract thought
Technical thought and language
Catches
Puzzles
Accidental leads
Demands for spacial [sic] imagination
Irrelevant dramatic appeal
Ability to reproduce
Ability to remember
Ability to reason, or infer
Involved style

To be held constant throughout test
Memory span requirements
Attention span, multiple strains
Difficulty of action demanded
Time required for complying with instructions
Vocabulary difficulty
Sentence structure
Word arrangement
Amount of material to be read
Uniformity of print
Uniformity of space relationship between pictures and print
Ease of finding place on paper
Interest and corresponding effort on part of child (37-38)

Reproduction tests such as Starch's or Brown's inadvertently activated many of these "controlling factors," most obviously the ability to remember and reproduce words and sentences, but parsing the passages on such tests also involved negotiating style, vocabulary difficulty, attention span, and inadvertent dramatic appeal. The measurable product of a reproduction test was thus not considered the sole product of "silent reading."

A bigger problem for these exams appeared on a more epistemological level: reproduction tests actually tested the reading ability of not one, but *two* readers. The reader scoring the exam was as much—if not more—subject to the exam's paradigms of what counted as reading as was the student taking the test; for, the grading reader would ultimately have to

decide whether the student's response contained the appropriate words or ideas to count as an accurate reproduction of the original passage. Grading these exams was thus itself a test of reading, as the convoluted instructions to scorers of Starch's test begin to make clear:

The comprehension is determined by counting the number of words written which correctly reproduce the thought. The written account must be carefully read and all words which either reproduce incorrectly the ideas of the test passage, or add ideas not in the test, or repeat ideas previously recorded, are crossed out. The remaining words are then counted and used as the index of comprehension. (3)

These instructions ask the scorer to move from the discrete unit of the word to the more variable space of an "idea" as if the two are commensurable in a standard and transparent way. Of course, this is not the case, and admitting that student responses "must be carefully read" does little to account for the wide range of scoring practices that might be applied to this test. Furthermore, because of this gap between words and ideas, strict adherence to the word count method could actually reward student responses that drastically alter the meaning of passage. For example, if a passage contains the words, "John Shane was cruel," and a student writes, "John Shane was not cruel," a scorer could still give credit for the words *John*, *Shane*, and *cruel*, despite the fact that the addition of the word *not* clearly changes the idea of the sentence (Monroe, *Critical* 16).⁴¹ For a scorer to decide which should have priority—the parts of the whole or the sum of the parts—is to ask for interpretations of the passage, the instructions, the student's response, and, fundamentally, the scorer's own idea of what "reading ability" should look like.

Reproduction reading tests ultimately required far too much subjective reading on the part of the scorer to make sense of the varied, unpredictable responses the tests yielded, so test designers turned to different formats that might more "objectively" capture the product of silent reading. If, the test makers thought, one of the problems with reproduction tests was that the

⁴¹ Monroe provides this example in his 1922 study of standard reading tests (16).

open-endedness of the exam format invited too many potential answers, then they would make a test with only one answer. E.L. Thorndike's *Scale for Measuring the Understanding of Sentences and Paragraphs* (1914) provides an early example of this type of test. One question type asks the student to read a very short passage and answer questions with even shorter responses. The other type of question further pared down the answers, requiring a single, unambiguous, often non-verbal mark from the student. These questions read more like logic puzzles: "If two and two are five, write the letter *b*. But if two and two are four, write the letter *c*," or "If the first word that you saw in this line had an *a* in it, cross out every *c* in that line" (Thorndike *Measurement* 38). Similar tests attempted to circumvent variation in response by providing students with a limited set of possible answers. M.E. Haggerty's *Sigma 1 Reading Test* (1920) has a section of yes/no questions such as "Do dogs bark?" and "Is ice hot?" (8), while F.J. Kelly's *Kansas Silent Reading Test* (1916) pioneered the use of multiple choice answer sets that are ubiquitous today. Each of these innovations saved the grader the hassle of wading through student compositions, counting ideas and words at her discretion. This is not to say that grading these exams had become completely objective. Some of the questions relied so heavily on convoluted turns of deductive logic that even the scorer might get confused. On the Kansas exam, for instance, Kelly assumes that any teacher can answer most of his questions without a key, but has to provide "Correct Answers to Some of the More Difficult Exercises" just in case (73). On tests that required drawings or markings, many scoring keys still relied on the discretion of the grader. For example, two questions on Haggerty's exam ask the test-taker to draw an eye on a fish and then a tail on a rabbit. The answer key directs the scorer to give credit for anything "obviously intended to be an eye" on the first question; for the second question, the key states, "Tail must be clearly an extension of the tail on the rabbit" (*Manual* 25). The "obviously" and "must clearly" reinforce

the presumed objectivity of the exam while papering over the judgments that must still be made by the grader. On the whole, however, question, puzzle, and direction exams seemed to eliminate the need for the scorer to make any independent judgment, thereby ensuring a higher standard of accuracy and objectivity.

The transition from passage reading to verbal puzzles to questions with increasingly simplified answers shows how test makers struggled to find a “tangible objective product” of silent reading that was the product of *only* silent reading and not of any number of other related mental or physiological variables. In fact, the search for an objective reading product actually led test makers to a specific reading practice, one that appeared to be a simple two-step process: information was transferred from the page to the reader, at which point the reader used that information to effect some change in the state of the page. The less interference there could be from factors such as difficulty of vocabulary or complexity in the requested response, the more trustworthy the exam was taken to be as a test of “silent reading.” Along the way, the amount of reading required by these reading tests was drastically curtailed, as was (the testers hoped) the possibility for error—that is, interpretation—on the part of either the test-taking reader or the test-scoring reader.

A telling example of how test makers gathered behind a particular type of seemingly-non-interpretive reading comes in the form of a revision of one reading test by another researcher. In 1918, Walter S. Monroe, the Director of Educational Measurements at the Kansas State Normal School, issued a revision of Kelly’s earlier *Kansas Silent Reading Test* (1916). In an article in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* explaining his revisions, Monroe details the lengths to which he has gone to make sure that his test questions draw only from “the field of general reading” and not from outside information or specialized skill (303). Comparing

Monroe's specific revisions to Kelly's original test provides more insight into how his questions and reading selections are designed to prompt an information-based exchange between the reader and the test. Take, for example, a question from each exam that uses a poem as a reading text.

Kelly's original test uses the following selection and question:

'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herds wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.' (Gray)

Study the above quotation carefully. The author lets us know his feeling about the coming night. If you think his feeling is one of fear and dread, underscore curfew. If his feeling is one of peace and gladness, underscore ploughman. (69)

Monroe has not only replaced the selected poem, but has also revised the question:

O suns and skies and clouds of June,
And flowers of June together,
You can not rival for one hour
October's bright blue weather.

Which month does this stanza say is the more pleasant? (304)

While both questions are based on reading a stanza of verse and answering a question, the two stanzas, as well as the two forms of questioning, are qualitatively different. In many ways, Kelly's stanza is closer to the longer reading passages discussed above than to Monroe's revisions. The marked literariness of the language in the stanza is confirmed by the attribution of the passage to a real author (Gray), which immediately elevates the selection from the register of the test question to the register of the poem, even though the word "poem" does not appear anywhere in the question. Kelly's instructions also help effect this shift in register. The student must "study" the poem carefully in order to answer this question, which asks not for a factual piece of information provided by the poem, but for the "feeling" the poem communicates. The line, "The author lets us know his feeling about the coming night," is meant to serve as a

perfunctory gloss of the entire stanza, but the self-apparent nature of this statement relies on a very specific set of reading skills. The reader must extract temporal information from words and phrases such as “knell of parting day,” “homeward plods,” and “leaves the world to darkness”; the reader must also be comfortable with the conflation of the poem’s first person (marked only by “me” in the final line) and the author. In short, the reader of this selection, which appears on a test for Grades 6, 7, and 8, must read it as a poem before she can begin to parse Kelly’s instructions to treat it like a test question.

In the wider world of reading, Monroe’s stanza could also be subjected to a poetic reading practice, but both the nature of the stanza and the framing provided by the test discourage this type of reading. In his notes on this question, Monroe acknowledges that there are many ways to read a poem—to enjoy, appreciate, or interpret, for example—but the standard reading test is not the place for such readings. Instead, Monroe argues that his question asks the reader simply to “secure information” from the stanza: even though it looks like a poem, the test requires that students read it as a weather report (304). The language of the stanza and the question are meant to prompt the reader to approach the stanza with an informational purpose. Gone is the injunction to “study carefully” or any talk of authors or feelings. Instead, Monroe presents this stanza in a declarative mode: it has something to “say,” whereas Kelly’s coy stanza performs a much vaguer task as it “lets us know [the author’s] feeling.” Information in Monroe’s poem is not interpreted but rather straightforwardly found and delivered. As Monroe says, “There may be other ideas which one should get from this stanza but it seems clear that this [the answer] is the dominant one” (304). Within Monroe’s framework, the variability permitted in the reading of poetry must be bracketed in order to elicit this supposedly more uncomplicated type

of reading from the student taking the test. Any reading that ventures into more interpretive territory runs the risk of being wrong.

Monroe's revisions to Kelly's test neatly encapsulate the extent to which silent reading test makers attempted to extinguish interpretation from the "field of general reading" in order to secure a tangible, objective product. Even in his own time, however, other test makers and researchers realized that Monroe ran the risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water by insisting on such starkness in his approach to reading. E.C. Witham, who reviewed Monroe's exam in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, provided statistical evidence showing how student scores suffered from Monroe's particularly strict scoring instructions.⁴² He concluded, "A more liberal basis of scoring would give the child credit for the test whenever the answer indicates that the substance of the passage has been fairly well comprehended" (518). Others, such as I.A. Gates, focused on the role that chance might play in a test such as Monroe's, where many answers can be selected at random without doing any reading. In one example provided by Gates, a test filled in at random yielded a comprehension score equivalent to that of a beginning fourth grader, a fairly decent score for having done no reading at all (445). Not all tests were as strict as Monroe's, as other test developers found ways to be more forgiving of variant readings while still insisting on one correct response. Although Thorndike writes, "The general intent should be to require an answer that proves that the pupil has understood the passage perfectly," he proves to be more lenient than the criterion of "perfect understanding" would permit on his reading scale (*Measurement* 49). He includes a range of answers in his key, treating variant

⁴² Monroe's instructions state: "If a pupil is asked to underline a word, the word must be underlined and not have a circle drawn around it or a check mark placed after it, in order for the exercise to be counted correct. If a pupil is asked to draw a line around a word, the word must have a line drawn around it in order for the answer to be counted correct." Witham argued that, because the test required such rapid speed in reading and responding, students were liable to ignore the specific types of marks asked for by the exam questions (518).

responses as markers of partial comprehension (fig. 1.4). Elsewhere in his instructions, specifically for questions that require drawn responses, Thorndike advises the grader to “score as correct any response which indicates with fair surety that the pupil read and understood the directions,” with *fair surety* determined at the discretion of the scoring reader (*Measurement in Reading* 53). By allowing for partial credit, Thorndike acknowledged the possibility of partial understanding.⁴³

PLAN FOR SCORING TEST F	
F. 1. Yes	0
Yes do all	0
Yes if he wants to be promoted	0
Yes but sometimes	0
Yes he always does	0
He must do all his work	0
He must do all the lessons that the teacher wishes	0
All that the teacher asks him	0
Yes but all other duties prevent him	2
Yes if he has not anything to keep them home	2
Yes if both parents are living	3
If it is possible	3
No	4
No if the boy's father died	4
No sometimes his father died and he had to earn money etc.	4

Fig. 1.4. A scoring scale with possible answers from 0 (incorrect) to 4 (correct) points for the short response section of Thorndike's *Reading Scale* demonstrating the possibility for partial credit (49).

But as Thorndike himself would show, no scaled scoring system was capacious enough for all of the answers a student might provide. In his seminal⁴⁴ 1917 article, “Reading as Reasoning: A Study of Mistakes in Paragraph Reading,” Thorndike provides a list of every answer given by 200 sixth grade students to the following paragraph-based question:

⁴³ Thorndike's partial credit system anticipates the weighted grading systems that would be developed in the 1920s. Samuel O. Welday provides such an example in his Stanford MA thesis, which developed a “weighted idea method of scoring” that assigned different point values to different ideas in a reproduction passage based on their importance to the overall meaning of the passage (45).

⁴⁴ In a 1971 retrospective on the influence of Thorndike's article, Wayne Otto writes, “Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say [...] that attempts to define reading are largely a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with Thorndike” (435).

Read this and then write the answers to 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Read it again as often as you need to.

In Franklin, attendance upon school is required of every child between the ages of seven and fourteen on every day when school is in session unless the child is so ill as to be unable to go to school or some person in his house is ill with a contagious disease, or the roads are impassable.

1. What is the general topic of the paragraph? (323)

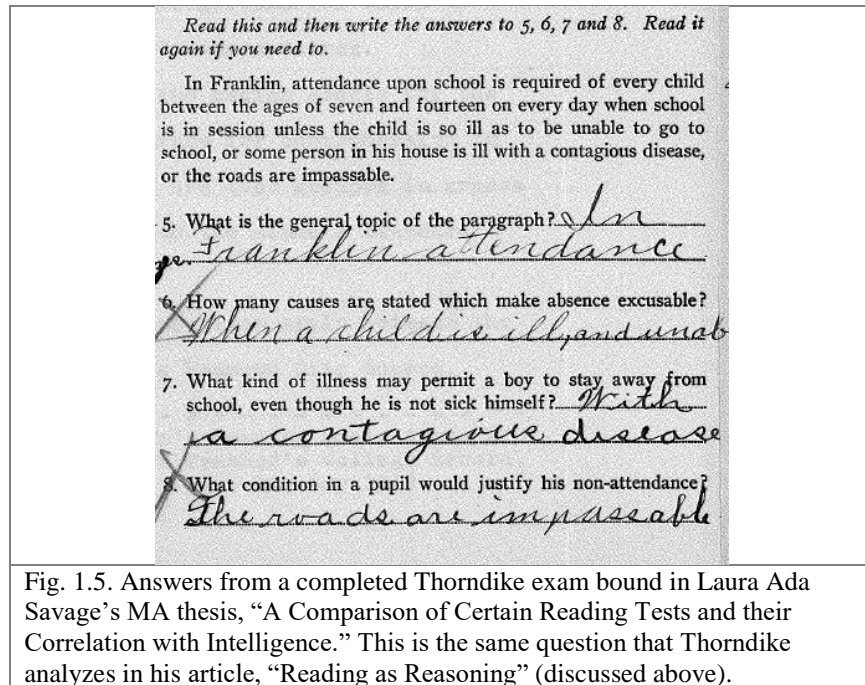
One might expect more variation with this particular question than with Monroe's poem, but perhaps not on the scale that Thorndike reports: he lists the over fifty different ways in which students responded to this question, along with the frequency of their appearance. "School" is the most popular response, given by 15 students out of the 200 tested, but the next most common answer is the enigmatic "Capital," given by 11 students. When we start to look at answers given by only one student, the mystery only deepens. "It was a great inventor," "an inch and a half," and "Subject and predicate" appear as student responses (324-25). And perhaps most alarmingly, 36 students—nearly one in five of those tested—left this seemingly basic comprehension question unanswered. Thorndike can only ask what has gone wrong with so many readers to yield answers that "show a variety that threatens to baffle any explanation" (327).⁴⁵

Thorndike explains the shocking variety of student answers to seemingly straightforward questions through a phenomenon he calls "potency." As we read, according to Thorndike, "The mind is assailed as it were by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften,

⁴⁵ Here are all of the answers given to the question, "What is the general topic of the paragraph?": Franklin, in Franklin, Franklin attendance, Franklin School, Franklin attending school, days of Franklin, school days of Franklin, doings at Franklin, pupils in Franklin, Franklin attends to his school, it is about a boy going to Franklin, it was a great inventor, because its a great invention, the attendance of the children, the attendance in Franklin, school, to tell about school, about school, what the school did when the boy was ill, what the child should take, if the child is ill, how old a child should be, if the child is sick or contagious disease, illness, on diseases, very ill, an excuse, the roads are impassable, even rods [sic] are impossible, a few sentences, made of complete sentences, a sentence that made sense, a group of sentences making sense, a group of sentences, subject and predicate, subject, the sentence, a letter, capital, a capital letter, to begin with a capital, the first word, a general topic, good topic, leave half an inch space, the heading, period, an inch and a half, an inch and a half capital letter, the topic is civics, the answer (324-35).

emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand” (329). Certain parts of this verbal assault, Thorndike argues, carry more weight for a reader, and these “over-potent” words come to determine the direction of a reader’s comprehension. Taking the question above as an example, if a reader takes “topic” to mean the top or beginning of any paragraph, then answers like “a letter” and “the first word” seem more reasonable than random. In a completed student exam bound with the pages of a Stanford University MA thesis on reading exams, we can see an example of this type of mistake: the student has answered the question about the paragraph’s “general topic” by simply copying the first three words of the paragraph (fig. 1.5). While she receives credit for that answer, she misses another due to a different “potency” error. In question 8, “What condition in a pupil would justify his non-attendance?,” the student has answered, “The roads are impassable.” This answer shows that the student has identified “condition” and “non-attendance” as potent words in the question, and yet she has missed the equally important phrase “in a pupil.” Impassable roads can indeed justify an absence, but impassable roads *in a pupil*? The difference between a right and wrong answer hinges on the potency of “in,” which, unfortunately, the student has not recognized. In both cases, we can reconstruct the paths of reasoning that may have led to the student’s answers by adjusting our sense of which elements in the questions to view as potent or not.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Savage’s thesis also contains a completed Monroe Silent Reading Exam featuring the poem-based question discussed above. The student makes a similar potency mistake: presented with this seemingly simple poem and asked whether June or October is the more pleasant month, the student answers “May.” While May is clearly not correct, we can still recover the path the student took to get there: May is, after all, a rather pleasant month. So while the student does not get the question right, not all of the stanza’s information has completely eluded his comprehension. Unfortunately, these small traces of understanding are not enough to count as “reading” within the narrow definition that Monroe’s exam proscribes.



Thorndike's definition of "reading as reasoning" may strike us now as self-evident—of course "reading" entails making decisions based on reasoned reactions to text—but it gets at the heart of the issue facing test makers who hoped to find some objective product of silent reading. The responses that a silent reading test records are ultimately evidence of reasoning, of the small decisions that the reader makes in what Thorndike calls the "provisional" moments between taking in marks on the page and making a response (326). In these provisional moments, the silent reader must assess the possible validity of everything he takes in, and while a reading test such as Thorndike's can record the end result of this internal assessment, the test cannot by itself assess the validity of the result. Any notion of right and wrong must come from outside of the test and from another reader's—the test maker's—imposition of a particular matrix of potencies. As much as silent reading test makers wanted to eliminate interpretation from their assessment instruments, their repeated failures to do so only revealed that their tests were *themselves* interpretations.

Thorndike concludes his study by reminding his readers, “It is not a small or unworthy task to learn ‘what the book says’” (332). Nor, it turns out, is it a small or unworthy task to learn whether someone has learned “what the book says.” The impossibility of isolating “silent reading” as a tangible product confirmed a fundamental fact about reading: that “reading” is never a single variable, but instead combines mental and physiological processes with a host of culturally-determined assumptions and practices—interpretive “potencies”—that determine how a reader extracts meaning from text. While researchers had long had an interest in the mental and physiological aspects of reading, these cultural variables were more surprising and harder to control for in the empirical framework of standardized test development. So while someone like Walter S. Monroe could write that “ability to understand sentences and paragraphs depends in part upon one’s store of information,” a question remained as to how to account for the different stores of information that readers might bring to a test (“Standardized” 303). As the next section will show, standardizing reading required first standardizing this store of information, a process that further narrowed how these tests conceived of and measured “reading.”

General Knowledge for General Reading

The frustrations of early standard reading test makers provided a key insight for those who sought an objective reading practice: if interpretive possibility could not be suppressed by the form of the questions or answers on a test, then reading instruction needed to provide a standard “store of information” that would render any variant interpretations self-evidently wrong. Reading was taught not only on the level of decoding, but also on the level of understanding, and tests were showing that too many students did not have the kinds of understanding that test makers valued.⁴⁷ This is the complaint at the heart of M.E. Haggerty’s

⁴⁷ I borrow these terms—decoding and understanding—from Ott 437.

outrage in a 1922 survey of New York rural schools, in which Haggerty compiles a litany of egregious student errors:

One pupil in every seven did not know that “manuscripts convey information.” [...] About one-fourth of all eighth grade pupils asserted that, “All laws are enacted with facility.” [...] One in every three pupils did not know that “a knave” is “a rascal” and a larger number did not know that “to beguile” means “to deceive.” Twenty-eight in every hundred denied that “Embezzlers practice fraudulent activities,” and twenty-seven in every hundred believed that “Imbeciles have high intelligence.” (Rural 37-38)⁴⁸

Haggerty’s complaints reveal how far “reading” has come from Kelly’s 1916 definition of reading as “the ability to get meaning from the printed page” (Kelly 63). Haggerty is not asking students to *get* meaning—he is testing the meanings that students already have and bring with them to the exam. This meaning-making system, in Haggerty’s view, should consist of a common vocabulary of words, values, and experiences. More important, it must also include a common repertoire of interpretive sensitivities:

Further, he should understand when an author says “He slipped away from the blaze and bustle of the station down the gloom and silence of the broad canal,” and further reinforces this idea by such expressions as “dark waters,” “here and there a lamp” and “uncertain glimmer” that he is not describing a “very light” scene. (41-42)

Under the guise of seemingly transparent “understanding,” Haggerty elides all of the actual interpretive work that must go into a reading of these lines to produce the right answer: noticing and prioritizing words such as “gloom” and “dark,” recognizing the parallelism between “blaze and bustle” on the one hand and “silence” and the implied dark on the other, taking “light” as an opposite of dark rather than as an opposite of heavy. As these moves and others are collected, normalized, and rendered invisible in an act of “understanding,” the test further reinforces the expectation that this scene—and any other—has a singular and self-evident meaning. Anything

⁴⁸ Later entries in Haggerty’s list of things students “should know” touch on social and behavioral conventions, “that ‘Loud boastings give offense,’ [...] and that ‘An officer may arrest a vagrant youth’” (40-41).

other than “understanding” would produce a rogue reading, which, on Haggerty’s test and many others, does not count as any reading at all.

This foundational assumption, that “reading” requires knowing and adhering to culturally shared epistemological behaviors and expectations as much as alphabetic information, helped shift the focus of test makers from the products of silent reading to the processes that silent reading required. Standardizing silent reading required standardizing the “store of information” that a typical student would bring to the test, and the tests themselves, along with the pedagogies that they inspired, were the perfect instruments for codifying, promulgating, and compelling adherence to this new body of “general knowledge.” This knowledge would contain anything from the denotative and connotative meanings of words to shared ideas of ethical and aesthetic value. We might anachronistically call this potent formation “cultural literacy,” but at the time, the tests simply—and perhaps more insidiously—called it “reading comprehension.”⁴⁹ Silent reading tests and pedagogies programmatically reproduced this body of knowledge on a mass scale, one new reader at a time.

Who and what was included—and excluded—from this shared knowledge base, and what type of reading did it sanction and encourage? On the level of content, the “general knowledge” presented in reading tests and lessons in fact drew from very local lexicons, experiences, and objects. For example, the setting, subject, and vocabulary of “The Long Slide” passage on *Brown’s Silent Reading Test* speak to the test’s roots in New Hampshire. The passage takes place in “a small town in the country” and tells the story of a sledding expedition gone awry during a winter day recess at a one-room schoolhouse. With vocabulary such as “a double-runner,” “the

⁴⁹ The Oxford English Dictionary traces the earliest appearance of “cultural literacy” to a book review article from 1946; more realistically, the term does not obtain the ideological weight we now associate with it until 1987, with the publication of E.D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*.

logging road,” and “a short coast,” the passage would pose a considerable challenge to readers who have no experience with sledding in the New England landscape. E.L. Thorndike acknowledged the local influences on display in his *Reading Scale*. One portion of his test asks students to identify boys’ names from a given list (Samuel, Claude, Isaiah, Reuben, Ezra, and Ichabod), and while the names have been “normed” by Thorndike’s initial sampling and calibration, he admits that the list may show a bias toward the local knowledge of “the large percentage of Jewish children in the schools at my disposal” (26). Thorndike notes that in a revised version, he would add “e.g., as boys’ names, Frank, Joseph, Richard, Walter, Edgar, Jacob, Malachi, Nehemiah, Matthew, Luke, Levi, Leo, Ivan, Jacopo, Petro, Eric, Edmund, Augustus, Nicholas, and the like” (26). Of course, many of these names still appear skewed to the student populations that Thorndike likely encountered in the New York City schools in which he worked. As honest as Thorndike’s acknowledgment is, however, it appears to be the exception to a rule, as other test makers unthinkingly standardized everything from local animals to local weather conditions via the filters of their own local knowledge.

My own roots in sunny California make the idea of standardized weather a particularly trenchant example. Consider the following question from Kelly’s Kansas test:

My fingers were numb with cold from carrying my skates. My breath looked like steam before my face and froze into a thick frost on my muffler. My mother saw me coming and called, ‘Clean off your shoes and then come in and get warm.’ Which do you think I had on my shoes, mud or snow? (70)

Kelly’s intended answer is “snow,” but I cannot help but imagine how I would have answered such a question in the third grade, given that I had not experienced the specific set of phenomena that the passage assumes of its readers. In fact, I could have made a convincing case for the wrong answer: I played outside in many a cold, muddy winter day and had a real fondness for doing so in roller skates. Furthermore, a word like “muffler” would have no meaning to me until

I learned that it is part of a car. And yet, I cannot see myself, even as an eight-year-old, answering *mud* to this question. The numbing cold and steamy breath may not have been common experiences for me, but they signified the “winter” of reading primers and classroom posters I had learned as universally true. Teaching students in temperate climates that there are four distinct seasons may not register as ideological indoctrination, but that *numb, cold, skates, steam, frost, and muffler* all add together to signify *snow* no matter where a student lives is nonetheless a feat of epistemological alignment to a standard, normal definition of *winter* and a subtle devaluing of, in this case, my own local, empirical knowledge.

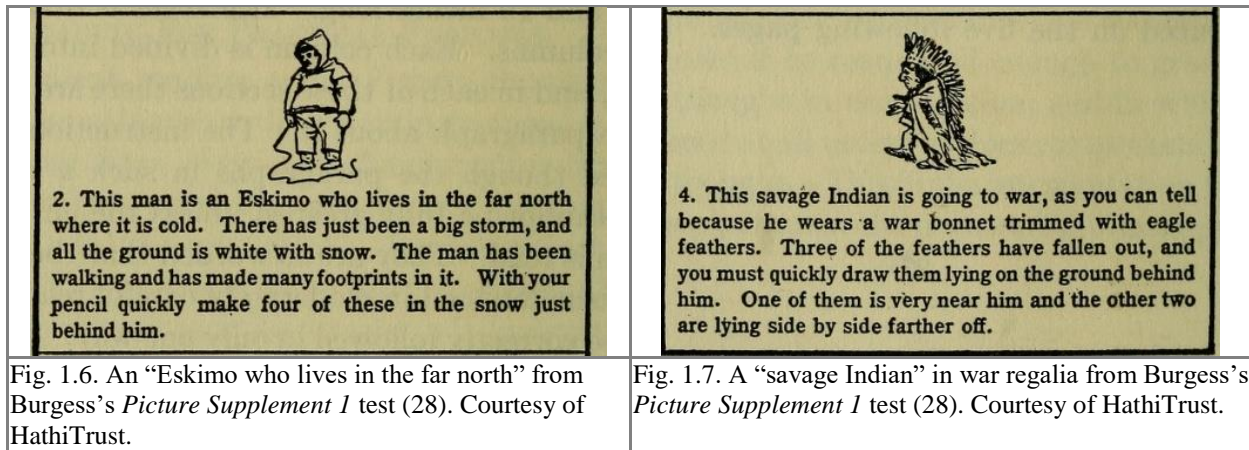
If the examples above seem parochial or unimportant, then consider a more troubling instance of how reading tests and instructional materials demanded certain assumed knowledges of their readers. The objective correctness of a test provided a platform for normalizing exaggerated, often harmful notions of racial, ethnic, national, and gender identities. On Monroe’s exam, the sample question on the cover—that is, the question that everyone should be able to answer in order to demonstrate the mechanics of the test—presents the following riddle:

I am a little dark-skinned girl. I wear a slip of brown buckskin and a pair of moccasins. I live in a wigwam. What kind of girl do you think I am?

Chinese French Indian African Eskimo

The details “dark-skinned,” “buckskin,” “moccasins,” and “wigwam” are meant to signify “Indian,” but only one “store of information” can generate this answer. Furthermore, the test leaves no space for a student to speak back to these types of stereotypes. On Burgess’s test, for example, which asks students to modify illustrations, an “Eskimo who lives in the far north where it is cold” and a “savage Indian” are presented as canvases for the student response, which, per the test’s instructions, must add details that augment these stereotypical images (figs. 1.6, 1.7). Connecting the stereotypes of “general knowledge” to the right-and-wrong framework

of the exam only invests the ideological orientation behind the stereotypes with a new form of authority.



The criticism that the content of standard reading tests creates and perpetuates biases and privileges that work against already-disadvantaged groups of students continues to plague the testing movement today.⁵⁰ Less remarked on, however, is the way in which the same gestures that normalize particular knowledges at the expense of others also work in tandem with a testing form that normalizes a particular type of *reading* as well. We can see how “general knowledge” and “general reading” end up mutually reinforcing the ideals and goals of the other in a test such as S.A. Curtis’s *Standard English Test* (1914), which uses a multi-part story called “Bessie’s Adventure” to test different dimensions of students’ reading abilities. On the level of content, the story reinforces normative ideas of behavior—particularly for girls. “Bessie’s Adventures” begins, “All day long Bessie had been a very good girl. Not once had she gotten in mother’s way” (*Manual* 84). This streak of obedience comes to an end, however, when Bessie sees a stray dog wander into her yard. As she follows him out from the safety of her garden and into the “big and strange” world of the city, Bessie gets lost and abandons all hope of ever returning home

⁵⁰ See Willis 307-309 for a summary of her argument that “reading comprehension” is “a mechanism used by dominant groups to help inculcate dominant group ideas” (307).

(81). It is only when she sees “a big blue-coated policeman”—“her very own policeman with whom she visited every morning through the fence”—that she is safely returned home to her mother (84). The final line of the story neatly closes Bessie back into the domestic fold: “Bessie’s first adventures were over” (84). The moral of Bessie’s story is clear: exploration and disobedience lead to loneliness and alienation from the comforts of a well-regulated social world.

As the story’s content rewards obedience, the test’s questions and modalities of student response perform a similar type of disciplinary work by demanding imaginative obedience as a part of the reading process. The story is divided into four parts, with each part designated to test a different reading skill: parts A and D are read aloud by the examiner as dictation and reproduction tests, and Parts B and C are read silently as tests of “normal” and “careful” reading, respectively. Between Parts A and B there is a composition section in which the examiner explains to the students:

The story I have just read you is not finished. I want you to use your imagination and make up the rest of the story for yourself. Look at the picture and think what you would do if you were in the little girl’s place, and what other adventures Bessie might have had during the rest of the afternoon. (86)

Given two blank, lined pages and seven minutes to think and write, the students are prompted to imagine how the story continues by inserting themselves into Bessie’s place. The possibilities for the continued story seem endless, as the students are given “the rest of the afternoon” to image “other adventures.”⁵¹ But the student’s adventures ultimately do not matter. On the second day of this two-day test, Bessie is back in the garden, once again facing a menacing dog. The student-driven energies of the story are thus preempted as the authorized version of Bessie’s story resumes, demanding that the student restrain her imaginative impulse in favor of Part B’s

⁵¹ In another sense, however, students are sharply circumscribed by the plot details at the end of Part A, where Bessie is left facing “the most terrible dog Bessie had ever seen”—a pressing concern that may have to be addressed before the story can continue onto other adventures.

prescribed “normal” reading, or conversely, affirming the student who may have anticipated the “real” story all along.⁵² Curtis’s temporary concession to student imagination is quickly undercut by the rest of the test’s focus on finishing Bessie’s story in the correct way. Any reading practice that attempts to create meaning outside of the set parameters of the test’s text are marked as a distraction.

Passages like “Bessie’s Adventure” show how the content and form of the reading test collaborate to enforce a particular protocol of “general reading.” This reading is doubly silent: it is unvocalized and unquestioning because the format of the test actively disciplines a questioning reader. The silence of the silent reading required by standard tests is its most chilling ideological feature, as it disarms the very reading practice—variant interpretation that talks back to the test—that would pose any challenge to the test’s other normativizing gestures.⁵³ Take, for example, the question below about a group of women from Kelly’s *Kansas Silent Reading Test*:

It was a quiet snowy day. The train was late. The ladies’ waiting room was dark, smoky and close, and the dozen women, old and young, who sat waiting impatiently, all looked cross, low spirited or stupid.

In this scene, the women probably kept their wraps on, because they wished to be ready to take the train. Pretty soon the station agent came and put more coal in the stove, which was already red-hot in spots. Do you think this made the women happier? (71)

An interpretive reading of this passage would seize on its clear ideological orientations in order to generate meaning. We might discuss how the details of the train and waiting room add dimensions of race and class to the nondescript women, or how the discomfort of the scene helps

⁵² The quality of the students’ compositions does not even affect the overall scores on the test. As Curtis explains, “the purpose of the tests is not so much to measure the abilities of the children in English composition as it is to determine the variation in judgment of teachers in various parts of the country, and the factors entering into such judgment” (“Standard” 378). In essence, Curtis is using both students and teachers to generate data in the interest of more accurately standardizing marks for composition.

⁵³ This demand for “uniform conditions” extends to the tests’ administrative protocols: Curtis’s test instructions go so far as to time and synchronize how the students must turn over their test sheets and how every teacher must read the passage for dictation (85-86).

to define the public social sphere of women. Alternatively, we might focus on the women's dress and challenge the passage's assertion that the women keep their wraps on by choice and not by an ingrained obedience to a larger behavioral code. In some contexts, such readings would be possible and even generative, but in the context of this test, they would only be wrong. The only right reading here accepts the passage's weighted premises and assume that the cross, low-spirited women, too stupid to take off their wraps, only get warmer and unhappier. There is no point in questioning the question—quite literally no point, since any aberrant reading will cost you a point on your overall test score.

Reading Within the Lines

By yoking a particular body of knowledge to a particular textual practice, silent reading test makers managed to perform an end-run around the issue of reading's insoluble subjectivity. Standardized reading tests came to be viewed as measures of "objective" reading ability as they papered over all of the specialized knowledges and interpretive assumptions that contributed to this sense of objectivity. "Teachers and pupils should come to think of standardized tests as impersonally as one thinks of measurements of height," argued the authors of a 1925 report from the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE), and indeed, the comparison to height or other physical metrics is apt (265). One of the major innovations of the educational measurement movement was to naturalize the highly artificial metrics generated by standardized tests and, furthermore, to have them stand, like height or weight, as vectors of objective comparison. Whereas the subjective marks of a single teacher meant little, the objective, standardized scores of a test enabled new types of comparisons among students, teachers, and schools. The U.S. primary school reading classroom was thus reorganized around the new forms of individual and collective pride, anxiety, and competition.

As silent reading tests proliferated, test scores became a valuable pedagogical spur. Manuals on reading instruction encouraged teachers to use the new forms of comparison enabled by tests to frame student achievement. One common suggestion was to display test results on classroom walls, where any student might compare her performance to those of her classmates' (figs. 1.8, 1.9). According to the NSSE report, "Such graphic records are a stimulus to effort and supply an objective basis for school marks" (261); Nila Smith agreed in her teaching manual that both individual and group progress charts serve as "an excellent incentive for growth" as they graphically broadcast a student's place in the classroom's hierarchy (94). If charts and posters are not incentive enough, then Smith suggests an old pedagogical stand-by: humiliation. In a "pin the tail on the donkey" exercise, students must perform reading competency for the entire class by pinning body part words to a picture of a horse. Smith makes it very clear that the exercise is not only fun, but also an effective lesson in the humiliating social consequences of illiteracy:

If a pupil places the word "nose" on the horse's back, great merriment will be evinced by the group. In such a case, the pupil who fails in his response should later be called on to place the same word again. It is quite likely he will not make the mistake a second time. (46)

Smith's invocation of "merriment" resonates with the instructions of individual tests, which often framed tests as "races" or "games" (Courtis *Manual* 36; Kelly 65). These ludic labels communicate to students that to struggle with a reading test was to miss out on something fun. Similarly, in Smith's classroom exercise, "merriment" is not merely another, more palatable word for humiliation, but also captures the sense that to perform well is to fall on the right side of a divide. In the reading classroom, you are either laughing or laughed at. Smith turns to this tactic repeatedly in her book: in an earlier instance, she suggests singling out students who make a mistake "to play a game by themselves for the entertainment of the whole room" (28). While the drill does provide extra practice for struggling students, it also singles these students out and

displays their reading difficulty to the rest of the classroom. Poor reading ability attracts attention, Smith instructs, but not of the positive kind; good reading ability, on the other hand, grants admission to the outside of the circle where you can judge those who do not belong.

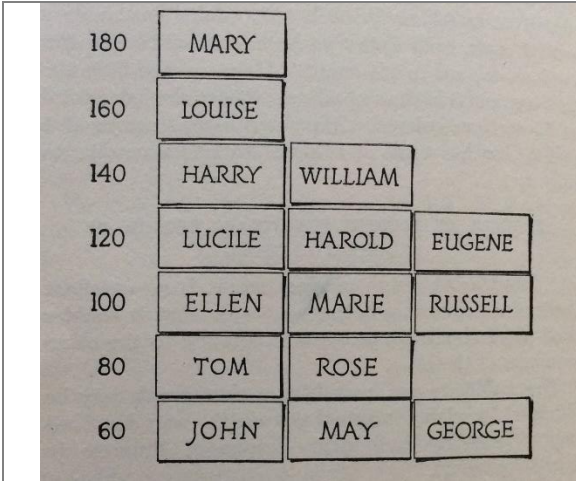


Fig. 1.8. A classroom wall chart made of movable name cards (Smith 100).

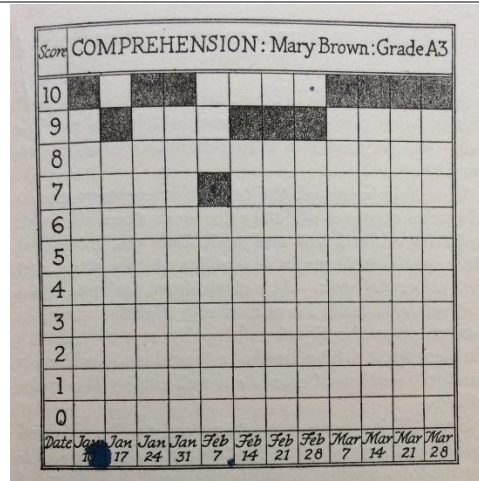


Fig.1.9. An individual progress chart in reading comprehension (Smith 95).

Smith’s classroom exercises begin to suggest how the merriment that comes from appearing at the top of a chart is made possible by the costly shame that comes from appearing at the bottom. Marion Monroe’s *Children Who Cannot Read* (1932), a touchstone text in the developing field of reading disability research, offers a clinical look at poor readers, those students of varying levels of intelligence who languish in the low end of a normal distribution curve of reading test scores (fig. 1.10).⁵⁴ Throughout her report, Monroe offers charts of individual students’ reading ability, and though the charts contain no temporal axis—they show discrete points gathered from different tests of reading ability—it is impossible not to read them in the same way that a fortune teller interprets lines on a palm: as a graphical display of the

⁵⁴ For *Children Who Cannot Read*, Monroe and her team of educators, psychologists, and physicians administered a battery of oral and silent reading tests, along with general intelligence tests, to a population of “average” and “defective” schoolchildren, ultimately showing that there was no causal link between general intelligence and reading ability. For more on how learning disabilities generally and reading disabilities in particular emerged as categories in early discourses on intelligence testing, see Danforth. Incidentally, Monroe is perhaps better known as the co-author with William Gray of the *Dick and Jane* readers.

student's lot in life, rising and falling in proportion to her ability to read (fig. 1.11). John A. O'Brien said of such charts, "The single line ascending or descending tells the pupil the story of his success or failure. [...] The direction or slant of the line tells the whole story. The ascent of the line becomes a source of joy; its decline a source of grief" (74-75). Interestingly, in the terms of Monroe's study, "progress" on these charts—that is, improvement in reading ability—is *not* depicted by an upward-sloping line. Rather, the desired state for a remediated reader is the stability of the horizontal line, in which age and ability are harmoniously aligned. A different set of charts that Monroe calls "error profiles" show how neither defect nor precocity approaches the standard of normalcy (fig. 1.12). This "normal" range of ability between the chart's dotted lines is a safe middle ground in which the challenges of learning to read can be predicted and addressed in a systematic way. To err in either direction is to read outside of these lines and to compromise your place as a reader in the classroom and, by extension, as a person in the wider world.

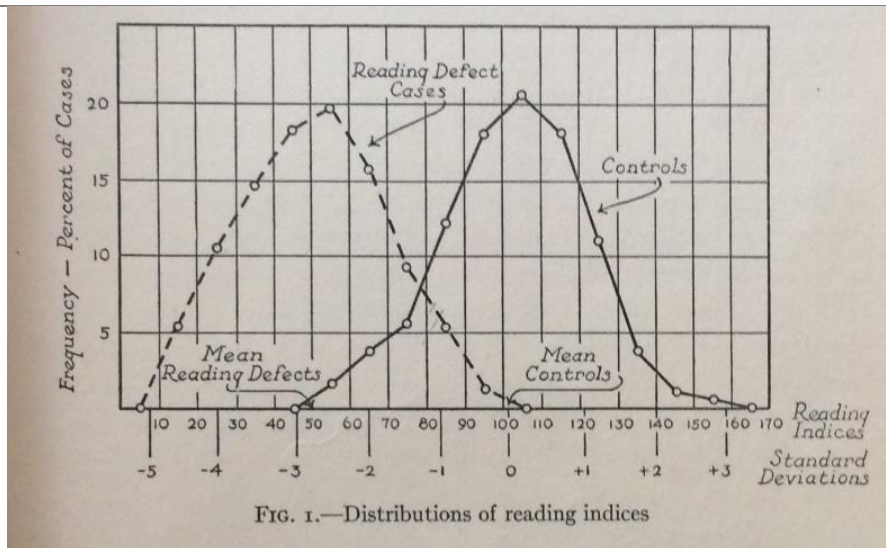


FIG. 1.—Distributions of reading indices

Fig. 1.10. Two histograms showing the distribution of reading ability in a control group and a group of “defect cases” (M. Monroe 15). The “defect” plot appears in dotted lines as a lagging, inferior version of the control plot, whose solid line suggests stability and normalcy. Note also how the mean score of the “reading defects” is nearly three standard deviations from the control mean, which reinforces the statistical extremity of the “defective” position.

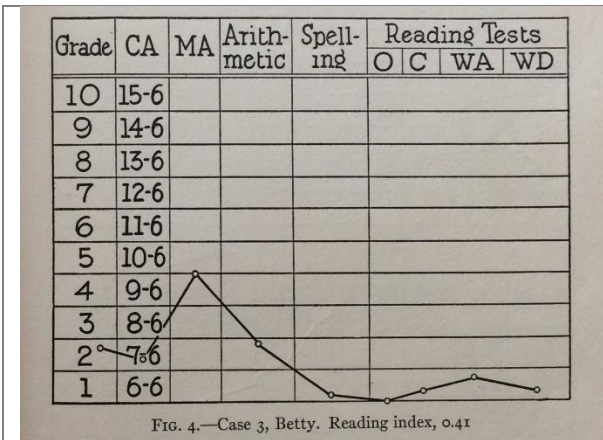


FIG. 4.—Case 3, Betty. Reading index, 0.41

Fig. 1.11. An individual student’s age and ability on various reading and general intelligence tests (M. Monroe 21). Betty’s scores indicate that, although the seven-year-old girl tests three years above her age in intelligence (MA is “mental age”), her reading ability is well below grade level. From left to right, the charts plot grade in school, chronological age, mental age, scores on standardized arithmetic and spelling tests normed to an age-grade scale, and four different measurements of reading ability (O, oral reading; C, comprehension of silent reading; WA, word analysis; and WD, word discrimination).

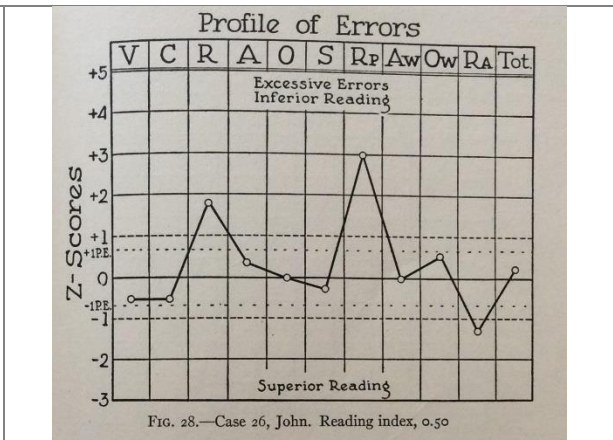


FIG. 28.—Case 26, John. Reading index, 0.50

Fig. 1.12. An “error profile” chart showing errors in different dimensions of reading (M. Monroe 67). The “z-score” along the y-axis represents a normalized measure of the number of errors a student makes in each of the various categories of reading ability marked along the top of the chart. Notably, a z-score of 0 does not necessarily mean that John has earned a perfect score, only that John has made the expected number of errors for a student at his level. The standard of normalcy, then, is not perfection, but averageness.

For those who fall outside of the dotted lines of normal reading ability, the stakes had never been higher, as Ernest W. Burgess writes in the Foreword to Monroe's report:

Children with reading difficulties are under a severe handicap in modern society. They are debarred from the world of imagination, knowledge, and power opened up by newspapers, magazines, and books. More than this, they are highly sensitive to this deficiency that marks them off from their fellows. The emotional blocking thus occasioned tends also to prevent their achievement in other fields.
(vii)

But Monroe's report does not need the expert opinion of Burgess to make this point clear: throughout, the report offers touching vignettes in which children themselves speak to the social and emotional tolls of reading difficulties. A nine-year-old student called Charles tells his interviewer, "I wish I could learn to read but I guess I'm too dumb," despite scoring above average on IQ tests (21); Mable, aged 11, makes a teary-eyed confession to copying from other students because "she read so slowly and with so many mistakes that it was impossible for her to read more than a few pages in an evening" (23). Betty, a seven-year-old, is described as "most engaging" as she tries to distract the examiner; offering to do arithmetic problems instead (20); she then dismisses her poor reading by saying, "Well, I don't happen to care for reading about little pigs" (160). Ten-year-old Jim is more straight-forward: "You don't need to expect much from me. But I can beat up any kid in my room. I do, too, if they laugh at my readin'!" (24). In these students' explanations and coping strategies, we can see how they narrate their struggles according to a common and familiar set of scripts in which reading ability stands as a marker of general intelligence, emotional balance, and social belonging at school and in the wider world.

Beyond the classroom, standardized reading tests and the statistical comparisons they enabled let students and teachers imagine themselves as part of—and in competition with—a larger community of readers. Curtis's test instructions remind students, "Exactly the same tests are being given in other schools all over the country." "If you are proud of your school," the

instructions continue, “you will do your very best” (85). This invocation of communal pride appears at the top of every page of Courtis’s exam, which bears the motto, “Measure the efficiency of the entire school, not the individual abilities of the few.” Of course, the abilities of individuals inevitably affect how the entire school is measured, so individual and group performance are never fully distinct. Indeed, in his guide to teachers on the use of his exams, Courtis suggests a score comparison exercise using a “comparative graph sheet” that helps students imagine themselves as an individual data point in a larger set:

As the children finish [charting their results] let them exchange graphs and record sheets with other children and check the curves drawn. As occasion offers, point out the variation from standard of the different individual curves and make sure the children properly interpret their own curves. (46)

This exercise actually enables a double comparison, as students see their scores in terms of their classmates as well as against a national norm. Any “variation from standard” is thus doubly alienating, from local and broader forms of community. Above all, these comparisons—and indeed, the ideas of “standardization” and “normalization” in general—reinforce the premise that no individual result has any meaning without determining its relation to the whole.

That these reading lessons had to prepare children to use reading in the world beyond the classroom was not lost on reading instructors, who constantly reinforced the notion that reading is a means of settling comfortably and unobtrusively into adult life. Emma Watkins’s *How to Teach Silent Reading to Beginners* (1922) is as much an etiquette book as a reading text as it primes beginning readers to make the leap from child to adult. With lessons on “Personal History,” “Salutation,” “Morning Duties,” and “Street Signs,” Watkins’s curriculum exploits the reading classroom’s normalizing power. Thus a student not only learns how to make sense of the written sentence, “How are you?”; he also learns the correct response: “‘I am well, thank you,’ in place of the customary ‘All right,’ so commonly heard among children” (44). Later the book

explains “the ‘Yes and No’ lesson,” which asks (and provides answers to) questions related to “how [a student] should govern himself” (96). With a “vocabulary” list of do’s—“Give people half the sidewalk,” “Be kind to animals”—and don’t’s—“Play in the street,” “Waste food”—the student not only learns socially accepted behaviors, but also learns to associate frictionless silent reading with the notion of good citizenship (96). This lesson is taken to an extreme in one of the final lesson plans in the book, the “Setting the Table” project. Students must follow written instructions in setting a proper a table, after which they participate in a mock dinner party. As the teacher quizzes the student party guests with flashcards that read “Always say _____ before eating” and “Drink _____,” she drills the students in etiquette as she drills them in silent reading. The connection between reading, mature behavior, and collective responsibility is intentional and impossible to miss.

The shared cultural knowledge and habits of mind created and patrolled by standard reading instruction and tests use reading to situate the modern subject in a social and intellectual equilibrium, one in which the contingencies of interpretation pose no threat to a collected whole. Through a test such as the *Starch Silent Reading Test* (1914), with its graded passages meant to track a student’s reading skills over time, a student would receive instruction and scores in these communal ideals year after year. Not only do the passages on Starch’s exam increase in textual complexity with each step between the first and ninth grades, but the passages also map the increasingly complicated ideological terrain of growing up. In the narrative of Starch’s test, reading has a central role to play in helping the student to navigate this terrain. The first passages use as their texts simple stories from American civic mythology that clearly yoke obedience and virtue to reading. In Passage 2, a young girl named Betty is rewarded for her filial respect and hard work with a surprise visit from George Washington. By reading, remembering, and

reproducing this passage in the context of the silent reading test, the student reader is interpellated into Betty's story of work, diligence, and ultimate reward. Passage 3 draws even stronger connections between virtue and print, as the reader meets a moccasin-clad figure called "Little Abe." Despite Little Abe's odd appearance and unfamiliar milieu, the modern student who is "very fond of reading" can nonetheless identify with Little Abe, who serves as an exemplar of bookish virtue as he clutches a book as if it were "gold or precious stones" (6). This love of reading connects the student reader to this ideal reader—and more important, to an ideal *American* reader. "Little Abe," with his "honest, twinkling blue eyes," fits the folk description of a young Abraham Lincoln, with whom the student is prompted to identify even as he is held at a distance for admiration.⁵⁶ Both Betty and Little Abe are eager, unquestioning readers marked by a transparent honesty and innocence, and their respective passages reward both characters' personal behaviors with national approbation.

As the passages progress, their textual complexity increases to test the increasingly mature and able reader; likewise, their themes deepen to meet and instruct a student reader on the cusp of entering an adult world. Passage 8 adapts a brooding passage from a Hawthorne short story to explicate the psychodrama of a budding adolescent. Ernest, the passage's protagonist, has (like the student reader) "ceased to be a boy," and in his maturation, he finds that he must balance his desire for intellectual independence with his obligations to his community. A life of the mind has its affordances—"better wisdom" and a "better life," thinks Ernest—but at the cost of communal belonging, and the passage ends abruptly before this tension can be resolved. In the context of the reading test, however, this tension need not be resolved, as the test is

⁵⁶ In the source story for this passage, "A Little Lad of Long Ago" in the *Elson Primary School Reader: Book Three*, these suspicions are confirmed in the story's final paragraph. We also learn that the book that Little Abe Lincoln cherishes so much is a biography of George Washington (161).

simultaneously a measure of individual intellectual merit and of communal standards. As the student reader reads and then re-writes Ernest's cogitations, he is at once invited to share in Ernest's intellectualism while performing the type of rote mental work required to show one's value to the wider community. Unlike Ernest, caught in a dangerous intellectual limbo, the test taker need not choose between subjectivity and community. As Starch's test consistently demonstrates, one can always work in the service of the other.

The final passage of Starch's test serves as a valediction to the student reader and a reminder of the lessons encoded in the preceding eight passages. Taken from an essay titled "The Voyage," Passage 9 is a meditation on traveling abroad—an apt subject for the student reader who is about to leave primary school and embark into adulthood—that begins with a proposition: "To an American visiting Europe, the long voyage he has to make is an excellent preparative." The speaker goes on to extol travel on the open sea and the "state of mind" it engenders, one "peculiarly fitted to receive new and vivid impressions" from a new and unfamiliar land (12). This state of mind is the "better life" of Passage 8, one beholden to no preexisting interpretive responsibilities. But the passage soon sees the author temper his initial excitement at the possibility of a clean mental slate as he veers back toward ambivalence:

In traveling by land there is a continuity of scene and a connected succession of persons and incidents, that carry on the story of life, and lessen the effect of absence and separation. We drag, it is true, "a lengthening chain," at each remove of our pilgrimage; but the chain is unbroken: we can trace it back link by link; and we feel that the last still grapples us to home. But a wide sea voyage severs us at once. It makes us conscious of being cast loose from the secure anchorage of settled life, and sent adrift upon a doubtful world. (12)

With "return precarious" from unmoored travel at sea, the boundedness of land travel, what some may see as a drawback and a "drag," is reimagined instead as a means of safety and familiarity. Ironically for a reading test, such a reading of this passage may very well qualify as a mis-

reading, as the source material for this passage clearly endorses the voyage at sea. In its misreading, however, the test finds unassailable evidence for its own ways of reading, a method built on reading's "continuity" and "connected succession" of interpretive gestures. Thus, as the end of a test that students could very well have encountered in every year of their schooling, this passage reassures the student, who is himself about to embark into the "doubtful world" of adult responsibility, that he has been certified to use the only tool he will need to once again find himself a "settled life": silent reading.

Conclusion

Writing on the boom in textbook production in the early twentieth century, which paved the way for an increasingly standardized and limited curriculum to make its way into U.S. schools, Richard L. Venezky assesses the damage thusly: "The revolution had been consolidated, and the message had become all warm and fuzzy, if also culturally biased" (Venezky with Kaestle 430). The same can be said for the textbook's pedagogical counterpart, the standardized reading test, save for the warmth and fuzziness. As I have argued in the preceding pages, silent reading tests helped to standardize reading for millions of children in the 1910s and 1920s precisely by eliminating any sense of fuzziness from reading—or, more accurately, by circulating the idea that "reading" well and in the right way was never fuzzy. Under the objective guise of the right-or-wrong framework of the test, test makers narrowed "reading ability" down to a specific type of textual processing based on a specific store of cultural knowledge. I have argued that this reading is doubly silent: unvocalized, but also unable to give voice to the silent cultural assumptions that place its interpretive moves under erasure. Furthermore, the new modes of statistical comparison enabled by test scores helped to incentivize the "right" type of reading. "Reading ability," rendered as a seemingly objective metric that was measured by a seemingly

objective test, could then be used as a proxy for personal worth and social belonging at the level of the classroom, the school, and the nation. While the importance of standardized silent reading tests to a broader history of reading may ultimately boil down to a tautology—by testing silent reading, reading tests showed that reading could be tested—this tautology has proved to be durable. Objections to such tests, which, as the beginning of this chapter showed, developed simultaneously with the tests themselves and have only grown louder and stronger, have done little to shake the faith in the testing movement’s fundamental premise that reading is a testable skill that produces a “tangible, objective product.”

As standardized tests have grown to be an ever-more structural component of U.S. education, they have continued to dictate the specific forms of reading that are prioritized and normalized at the earliest levels of literacy. Literary scholars have much at stake in these attempts to standardize reading, as a recent issue of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)* points out. In May 2015, the journal’s Theories and Methodologies section was dedicated to the special topic “Learning to Read.” The prompt for this moment of professional reflection on reading—the “central investigative instrument” of the *PMLA*’s audience (540)—was the recent attempt by the architects of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) to define “reading” at the primary- and secondary-school levels. As the special section’s editors note, the debates surrounding the Common Core’s English language arts (ELA) standards “remind us of the high stakes involved in training readers” (539). Additionally, they argue, literature professors have the “scholarly expertise and pedagogical experience” (539) to reflect on “what gains and losses the CCSSI’s systematized—some would say excessively systematized—approach to reading might bring in its train” (540). While many arguments for or against the Common Core tend to focus on how the ELA standards prioritize certain types of

texts, the 13 short essays in this special section are notable for their attention to how the standards attempt to normalize a particular kind of *reading*. As they investigate the overlaps and oppositions between this new standardized reading—“designed to prepare students for life outside the classroom,” the standards say in an echo of their early-twentieth-century predecessors—and the types of reading—“close” chief among them—valued in literature classrooms, the essays can be taken as one profession’s attempt to articulate its investment in reading (“English Language Arts Standards” qtd. in Ender and Lynch 540). Ultimately, Ender and Lynch put their fingers on exactly the type of fantasy that forms of “standardized reading” enable: with its emphasis on reading ability as a transferable set of skills, the CCSSI “has a democratic, universalist potential” that is particularly attractive to those that want to argue for the continuing, even deepening, relevance of the humanities (541). Of course, this potential is always undercut by the specific forms of knowledge that must be naturalized in order to maintain this universalist facade, but the recognition of the biases and exclusions that enable standardized reading do nothing to allay its imaginative appeal. As the tests in this chapter have shown, the idea that reading is a universal good has a long history, a history that literary scholars are as much a part of as the test makers and reading instructors of a century ago. While those of us working in higher education may feel quite distant from the policy debates happening in primary reading education, we should understand our own investments in reading not as separate from, but as functions of the ideological projects that are attached to reading in the earliest stages of literacy. The only chance we stand to defend reading as a strategy for combatting specific forms of inequality is to understand what makes reading so peculiarly suited for projects of exclusion in the first place.

Chapter 2

“What a farmer reads shows in his farm”:

Learning to be Literate with Adult Reading Primers

In March 1901, after two years of political wrangling and a party-line vote, Democrats in Maryland’s General Assembly amended the state’s election laws to change the look and layout of its ballots. Rather than listing candidates by party or marking an individual’s affiliation with symbols, all candidates would now be listed in a single column with nothing to differentiate them but their printed names. The ballot changes were intended to crack down on vote-buying and, in the words of an 1899 editorial in the *Washington Post*, “to purify and elevate suffrage” (“Buying”). The *Post* agreed with the rival *Baltimore Sun* that this method of “stopping election bribery by limiting the suffrage to the unpurchasable class” was the best chance the state had at stamping out voter graft (“Limiting”). And while any man could accept a bribe from either party’s operatives, the most “purchasable” vote was generally assumed to belong to the man who could not read or write. “It is doubtless that the illiterates contribute a majority of the purchasable vote,” writes the *Post*. “Their disenfranchisement would be a distinct gain for decency in politics and honesty in elections” (“Limiting”). Thus, “illiterates” were prevented from voting, if not by the letter of the law, then at least by its effects.

The political strategy behind Maryland’s attack on “illiterate” voters was not exactly subtle. In a 1900 article that reported the first whispers of the eventual election reforms, the *New York Times* cut through the subterfuge in a headline that screamed, “TO DISFRANCHISE NEGROES. Maryland Democrats Plan Legislation to That End.” While white voters would

inevitably be affected by the law as well—one projection in the *Post* declared that nearly a third of those affected by the ballot redesign in Montgomery County would be white—black voters would bear the brunt of its effect (“Disenfranchises”). According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, the law would effectively disenfranchise 90% of Maryland’s 52,000 African-American voters (“Gorman”). However, to read in the *Post* that “illiterates ought not to be among the sovereigns of the republic” was much more palatable than to declare outright that African-Americans should not be allowed to vote (“Limiting”). Disenfranchising “illiterates” was also much less clearly a violation of the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibited denying anyone the right to vote based on their “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Surely, went the thinking, an illiterate voter of *any* color was much more of a threat to American democracy than a black one. Election reformers might have been unable to obfuscate their political aims, but they could still use “illiterates” to make those aims much more broadly appealing, if not in effect, then at least by the letter of the law.

As the case of Maryland’s ballot reform shows, the rise of “illiteracy” as a societal woe and a political shibboleth was an important byproduct of literacy’s increasing ubiquity in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States. The 1900 Census found that 10.7% of U.S. adults couldn’t read or write, and in fitting irony, the rapidly expanding print culture of this period was obsessed with those “illiterates” that could not read their worried reports and editorials. The effects of this discursive concern about “illiterates” bled beyond the page. State legislatures from Maryland to California passed election reform laws to keep “illiterates” away from the polls, and in 1917, Congress finally succeeded in enacting a federal literacy requirement for immigration

into the United States.⁵⁷ Of course, what was actually understood to be undesirable about “illiterates” had very little to do with reading or writing. The pejorative “illiterate” could do work that “black” or “immigrant” could not: literacy was something to achieve, not something you are born into, and so being literate aligned with core American values of self-improvement, civic responsibility, and democratic participation. Thus, reading and writing served as convenient terms through which other forms of raced, classed, ethnic, national, or regional undesirability could be tacitly invoked as grounds for inclusion or exclusion from American life. “Illiterates” as a collective noun was as powerful as it was imprecise—imprecise because illiterates were black *and* white, urban *and* rural, recently immigrated *and* native-born—but powerful because this label provided culturally-agreed-upon cover for all sorts of racist, nativist, and nationalist projects.

While there have always been people who cannot read or write, the concept of “illiterates” as a distinct demographic and political category is a cultural product of *fin-de-siècle* American modernity. This chapter explores one particular site and set of texts that aided in the cultural production of “illiterates” as a way of setting this dissertation’s overall theme of “making readers” into relief. Cora Wilson Stewart (1875-1958), a pioneering advocate of adult education in the United States, dedicated her life to eradicating adult illiteracy. She is best known for her work as the founder of the Moonlight Schools, a series of evening school courses for adults that Stewart first designed in 1911 to address the rampant adult illiteracy in her home region of eastern Kentucky. Stewart spread her Moonlight School model across Kentucky and other southern states throughout the 1910s and 1920s, and she leaves behind a unique record of

⁵⁷ As evidence of the persistent purchase that illiteracy had in immigration discourse, NeCamp provides a remarkable fact: “nearly every legislative session between 1891 and 1917 voted on bills that sought to impose immigration restrictions through the use of a literacy test” (3).

her work. Over the course of her career, she published five reading primers: the three books of the *Country Life Readers* series (1915), *Soldier's First Book* (1917), and *Mother's First Book* (1930). She also wrote a primer specifically for work with Native American students, *Indian's First Book* (1920s), which, while never published, was circulated in mimeographed form on reservations in the Northwest where Stewart set up schools. Among the explosion of pedagogical print in this period, Stewart's primers are rare because they are intended specifically for English-speaking adult beginning readers. As such, they refract the concerns of this particularly fraught moment in the history of reading in the United States in a way that newspaper editorials and Census statistics cannot. If the prevailing trend of the time was to use "illiterates" as a vacated rhetorical term in the service of political projects, then Stewart countered this trend by seeking in both her schools and her textbooks to make "illiterates" people again, giving them a space in which to fashion themselves as a new type of subject: a reader.

After a brief background section on Cora Wilson Stewart and her Moonlight Schools, I turn my attention in the bulk of this chapter to Stewart's textbooks, in particular her *Country Life Readers*. Stewart's books differ from typical reading primers, which are usually intended for children, not only in terms of audience, but also in terms of candor. The *Country Life Readers* do not shy away from harsh "truths" about how illiteracy signifies in the eyes of the wider world—often in ways that have nothing to do with the ability to read and write. Through their illustrations, text, and writing exercises, Stewart's books force their "illiterate readers" to confront the many ways that they may be read as "illiterate" by others. Everything from farming practices, personal hygiene, and civic participation has the potential to speak to one's status as "literate" or not. As the books lay bare the many non-textual dimensions of illiteracy, they also dramatize the consequences of not conforming to these rules, relying on the shame generated by

the rhetorical force of the term “illiterate” and the recognition that literacy practices can mitigate that shame. Overall, I contend in my reading of Stewart’s books that they explicitly teach students something that is usually left implicit in social uses of literacy: that literacy is not just a set of objective milestones and skills, but is instead a highly social and contingent practice. By pulling back the curtain, as it were, on the social constructedness of literacy, Stewart opens a space for her students to imagine themselves as “literate” in this broader sense. While her books may not be the most effective method of teaching their readers how to read, they do teach invaluable lessons about how and why to *act* like a reader.

As a set of reading primers, Stewart’s books have a remarkably complex relationship to reading, and the final section of this chapter explores the more cynical side of her pragmatic approach to literacy. In her fervent belief in the undue influence of literacy as a social signifier, Stewart does end up perpetuating many of the tenets of what Harvey Graff has called “the literacy myth,” an ideological understanding of literacy that Catherine Prendergast pointedly glosses as “the flawed but rhetorically deductive and seemingly deathless argument that literacy will guarantee equality of opportunity, moral growth, and financial security and ensure the democratic participation of all individuals in society, regardless of other factors” (4). At times, Stewart’s interest in the limits of literacy leads her to reduce reading and writing to *mere* performance, calling into question the grounds of literacy’s supposed liberatory potential. However, Stewart sets herself apart from her contemporaries by refusing to conceal these ideological machinations from her students: even as she mobilizes the expected shame of the “illiterate” as a pedagogical tool, she lays bare the social elements that generate that shame, thereby disarming that shame and restoring some agency to the supposed objects of its rhetorical force. The value of Stewart’s primers to a history of reading comes from this honesty, as they

expose the interpretive and affective structures that give reading practices in this period meaning in ways that other sources—especially more literary sources—may obscure or take for granted.

Reading by Moonlight

Cora Wilson Stewart was born on January 17, 1875, in Rowan County, KY, the third child of a rural family of moderate means. Her father was a country physician who also ran a tavern and a general store; her mother, when she was not caring for her 12 children, supplemented the family income by working in the store and teaching. Her parents' combined efforts ensured that Cora was raised in a middle-class family that “encouraged intellectual achievement and cultural awareness and valued education above all, save devotion to God” (Baldwin 8). Cora was inspired by her mother to become a teacher, and after finishing at the Morehead Public School, she became a teacher there in 1890. Over the next decade, she also studied for a teaching certificate at Morehead Normal School, took courses at the National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio, and attended the Commercial College of Kentucky University in Lexington, where she would eventually become the first female faculty member in 1899. After the devastating death of her mother in 1900 and a brief foray into secretarial work to make money to support her younger siblings, Stewart returned to her home county, where, in 1901, she was elected Rowan County's first woman superintendent of public instruction.⁵⁸ A tumultuous, abusive marriage to A.T. Stewart that ended two separate times in divorce (1904 and 1910), as well as the death of her only child ten months after his birth (1907), drove Stewart deeper into her work, for which she earned a statewide reputation as a tireless, effective advocate for rural education. In 1911, she was elected the first female president of the Kentucky Education Association.

⁵⁸ Stewart received the Democratic Party's nomination in the superintendent race, in part because her brother, Bunyan Spratt Wilson, had strong connections to the party (Nelms 14; Baldwin 22).

For all of Stewart's hard work in her positions as superintendent, then as principal of Morehead Public and Morehead Normal, structural and cultural obstacles kept many of her constituents out of the public school's reach. The isolating mountain geography of the Appalachian foothills, coupled with treacherously unkempt roads, meant travel to the nearest public school was impractical for many families. In addition to these infrastructural problems, Rowan County had been gripped by a bloody feud between the Martin and Tolliver families for much of the 1880s. The years of violence had seen Morehead's population drop by more than half, and even by the 1900s, the memory of the feud kept residents on edge. Dark roads still carried the potential for ambush, and as family allegiances trumped more communal concerns, public institutions such as schools suffered the consequences of this insularity. As a result, a significant number of adults in Rowan County could not read or write; nor did they consider it worth the time, effort, or risk to send their children to school. Stewart's line of work put her into direct contact with this population. As she describes in her self-promotional memoir, *Moonlight Schools and the Emancipation of Adult Illiterates* (1922), Stewart spent years reading and writing letters for illiterate mothers, watching illiterate farmers lose money to unscrupulous bankers and middlemen, and fretting over the ephemerality of Appalachian culture that residents could set down in text. Inspired by the desire for literacy she saw among her county's residents, Stewart decided to dedicate her energies to the service of the countless adults in her county who could not read or write.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ This and other historical information about Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight Schools comes from two biographies on Stewart. The first, *Cora Wilson Stewart: Crusader Against Illiteracy*, by Willie Nelms (1997), offers a conventional biographical portrait of Stewart's life and work. The second, Yvonne Honeycutt Baldwin's *Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight Schools: Fighting for Literacy in America* (2006), offers a more critical version of the Moonlight School story, as Baldwin situates Stewart among contemporary pre-suffrage feminist social reformers. Both books draw extensively from Stewart's archives, held at the University of Kentucky.

Stewart's solution to Rowan County's illiteracy was to offer a set of courses that catered specifically to adult beginning readers. These "Moonlight Schools"—so called because Stewart insisted that the school sessions start on bright, moon-lit nights that made travel through the mountain roads safer than usual—would teach basic reading and writing skills to anyone who attended. With the support of local public school teachers, the first session began on September 5, 1911, "the brightest moonlight night, it seemed to me, that the world had ever known," Stewart recalls (*Moonlight Schools* 15).⁶⁰ Expecting around 150 students countywide, Stewart and her volunteer teachers were shocked when nearly 1,200 adults throughout the county showed up for school. Ranging in age from 18 to 86, coming from every possible walk of life, the students sat at the desks their children used during the day and began to learn to read.

Moonlight Schools soon became local institutions, with nearly every small, rural school house in the county hosting night sessions for adults.⁶¹ Classes started at 7pm and ended promptly at 9pm, during which time students completed lessons in reading, writing, and elective topics such as history, civics, arithmetic, and English. Stewart developed the instructional materials herself, which at first included a weekly school newspaper—to give students "a sense of dignity in being, from their very first lesson, readers of a newspaper" (*MS* 23)—and special "grooved pads" that taught students the strokes of the alphabet (Nelms 37).⁶² Not all the students were completely "illiterate"—while some had indeed never stepped foot in a school, others had rudimentary reading and writing skills—but for publicity purposes, Stewart liked to emphasize

⁶⁰ Future references to Stewart's *Moonlight Schools for the Emancipation of Adult Illiterates* will be cited parenthetically as "MS."

⁶¹ According to Stewart, communities took great pride in their particular Moonlight School, and the small newsletter published by Stewart for use in the schools helped foster rivalries among neighboring schools. For example, when the students of Bull Fork read that the students at Slab Camp had outfitted their schoolhouse with new stone steps and curtains, Bull Fork took to upgrading its own building as a matter of pride (*MS* 24).

⁶² Students also used these tracing rigs to learn how to sign their names by the end of the first class. The instructor would make a deep imprint of the student's signature in cardboard, which the student could then use as a guide (Baldwin 192-193).

the noble ignorance of most of her students. She also singled out the more ignoble forms of illiteracy—such as preachers who sermonized without being able to read the Bible, or school board trustees with no more than a third-grade education—as prime targets for Moonlight School remediation. Stewart could thus boast that she not only taught poor farmers and craftsmen how to read and write for the first time, but also improved the underdeveloped literacy skills of merchants, country doctors, and even fellow teachers. As we will soon see in the section below, because Stewart’s “literacy” lessons included so many other forms of socialized knowledge, this type of student diversity was arguably essential to the social mission of her schools. The first session of Moonlight School meetings ran for six weeks, at which point small graduation ceremonies were held for those students who had completed the course. Demand proved so great—demand from the students themselves, Stewart notes in her memoir—that she made plans to open a second session for the schools (*MS* 32). In the second round of Moonlight School courses, teachers reached 1,600 students, of which 350 had learned to read and write—at least by Stewart’s own standards—by the end of the session (*MS* 38).

In an age when the prevailing wisdom in education was that adults were too old to learn a complex new skill such as reading, Stewart’s teachers and students seemed to be achieving the impossible.⁶³ Not only were adults learning to read, but they were also learning from untrained, volunteer teachers, a fact that rankled professional educators seeking validation for their field. While the first Moonlight School teachers were recruited from the ranks of public school teachers in the county, additional volunteers soon joined from church organizations, women’s clubs, and the community at large. Stewart insisted that her teachers needed no formal

⁶³ That said, NeCamp offers a robust discussion of Stewart’s pedagogical methods (most drawing from the “whole word” school of reading instruction) and argues that, while these methods helped students see immediate results, they may not have been calibrated for lifelong literacy (50-55).

pedagogical training and instead preached the ethos of “Each one, teach one” (*MS 48*). Anyone who knew enough to read and write on their own knew enough to help someone else learn how to read and write, and she considered the closeness of her students and teachers one of the real assets of her program: “Some came to learn, some to teach, but all learned, for those who taught developed amazingly” (*MS 42*). Relying on volunteer labor had an additional benefit: the Moonlight Schools were addressing a societal ill at no cost to the state. Private philanthropy covered the few operating costs of the schools, so politicians in the state legislature could support Stewart’s cause without worrying about burdening the public coffers. For both educators and politicians, the Moonlight Schools were almost too good to believe.

Within a year, Moonlight Schools were established in other counties in Kentucky, and by 1914, the state legislature voted unanimously for the formation of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, of which Stewart served as chair (*MS 60*). At this point, Stewart essentially became a full-time fundraiser for her cause, going on speaking tours and offering “Moonlight School Institutes” where she trained prospective volunteers. By the end of 1914, there were similar programs in the Carolinas, Alabama, Minnesota, and Oklahoma; by 1920, New Mexico, California, Georgia, Washington, Mississippi, Arkansas, New York, and Pennsylvania had Illiteracy Commissions and evening school curricula based on “the Kentucky plan” (*MS 133*).⁶⁴ A few of these state Commissions were supported by legislative appropriations, but for the most part, Stewart’s movement continued to rely on the volunteerism and generosity of current and retired teachers, women’s groups, and churches.

⁶⁴ In addition to establishing state illiteracy commissions, many states also adopted slogans meant to rally their residents to the cause of illiteracy. “Let South Carolina secede from Illiteracy”; “Illiteracy in Alabama—Let’s remove it”; “Illiteracy in Mississippi—Blot it out”; “Let’s sweep illiteracy out of Arkansas”; “Pennsylvania a literate state in ten years” (*MS 144*). Many states also set dates by which they planned to completely eradicate illiteracy. North Dakota, for example, owing to its sparse population and, therefore, small number of illiterates, was certain it could be the “first literate state in the Union” by 1924 (*MS 143*).

By 1923, Kentucky alone had “emancipated” 130,000 souls from the bonds of illiteracy by Stewart’s careful count. Additionally, Stewart had made her movement a national one: she helped organize and serve as chair of the National Illiteracy Committee (under the aegis of the U.S. Bureau of Education), the Illiteracy Commission of the National Education Association, and the Illiteracy Committees of the National Council of Education and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs.⁶⁵ With such titles, Stewart was able to hail a broad coalition of educational and political supporters, all dedicated to the cause of the eradication of illiteracy. Reflecting on her decade of work, Stewart could offer this national panorama of the Moonlight School movement:

Virginia has had moonlight schools in her remote sections, West Virginia in her coves, Texas on her ranches, Louisiana in her parishes, Michigan in her lumber camps and the Dakotas on their plains. Moonlight schools have ministered to illiterate fishermen on the coast of Maryland, illiterate immigrants on the coast of California, illiterate Swedes in Minnesota, illiterate Indians in Oklahoma, illiterate Mexicans in New Mexico and illiterate white and colored people through the mountains and valleys of the South. (*MS* 143-144)

Despite Stewart’s powerful rhetoric of uplift and reform—rhetoric that was always “fine-tuned to the ears of philanthropists,” Baldwin notes (38)—the Moonlight School movement always existed as more of a curiosity than a model for lasting social reform, suffering from chronic underfunding by state legislatures and marginalization by the increasingly professionalized field of mainstream adult education. The committees that Stewart chaired became increasingly ornamental as more “professional” educators took the reins of the adult education movement in order to incorporate it into the ever-more-robust bureaucratic structures of the modern educational apparatus. The onset of the Great Depression only hastened the end of the committees and commissions that Stewart relied on to carry out her work, and by 1934, Stewart had retired from public advocacy work altogether.

⁶⁵ For an in-depth, behind-the-scenes account of Stewart’s participation on and fight for control of these and other committees, see Baldwin chapters 4 and 5.

In the larger sweep of U.S. educational history, which has tended to present early-twentieth-century school reform as an inexorable march toward professionalization, standardization, and corporatization, the local, idiosyncratic efforts of Stewart and other women reformers like her run the risk of getting lost in the margins.⁶⁶ At the height of her career, Stewart commanded an extensive network of educators and philanthropists dedicated to the cause of adult illiteracy; however, she remained a marginalized figure in her own time and continues to play only a minor role in histories of U.S. education. The two most recent studies of Stewart and her Moonlight Schools, Baldwin's *Cora Wilson Stewart and Kentucky's Moonlight Schools: Fighting for Literacy in America* (2006) and NeCamp's *Adult Literacy and American Identity: The Moonlight Schools and Americanization Programs* (2014), show that there is much to learn from Stewart's work by re-establishing her within more dominant narratives of educational and social reform history. Baldwin approaches Stewart from the perspective of a cultural historian, showing how Stewart's advocacy efforts exemplify a type of political engagement available to women in the days before suffrage, particularly in the U.S. South, where Protestant evangelical zeal could serve as an engine for modernization and reform. Modeling her work on that of Jane Addams, Ida Tarbell, and Carrie Chapman Catt, Stewart "set a maternalist agenda designed to harness the power of the state to the amelioration of social ills," a program of reform that both heeded older notions of a woman's obligations to family and home and allowed for direct and effective public engagement (187). Unfortunately, in Baldwin's estimation, at least, Stewart was not as effective as her forerunners, in part because of her politics,⁶⁷ in part because her ultimate

⁶⁶ Reynolds and Schramm's *A Separate Sisterhood: Women Who Shaped Southern Education in the Progressive Era* (2002) is one example of scholarship that actively works against this trend, as the authors place the efforts of women (including Cora Wilson Stewart) at the center of Progressive Era educational reform.

⁶⁷ As Baldwin notes, "Stewart led a crusade whose success depended on a strong state and federal government role in economic and social welfare" in a region that "feared and despised the extension of federal authority." She also entertained much more humanistic ideas about illiteracy that ignored racial differences and saw all illiterates, black or white, as "equally handicapped" (188).

goal—the eradication of illiteracy in the United States—was “hard to measure” and “hard to define” (188).

For her part, NeCamp studies Stewart for what her grassroots pedagogies can bring to deepening histories of literacy and adult education. In her comparison of Stewart to the Americanization movement that would eventually supplant her in the field of adult education, NeCamp draws attention to Stewart’s sincere understanding of literacy as socially contingent and her championing of volunteer-powered, community-based educational initiatives as particularly important correctives to histories that tend to overlook “extra-institutional literacy sites” (151). As they draw from Stewart’s copious public writings on literacy and from her meticulously prepared personal archive, both NeCamp and Baldwin are able to show the complexities and contradictions that defined Stewart’s politics and theories of literacy—complexities that Stewart herself often tried to paper over with a thick veneer of moonlit romance and charm. Their work has shown how Stewart provides a rich test case for rethinking the well-trod tropes of self-fulfillment, democratic participation, and civic well-being that often define histories of literacy, education, and social reform. Because she worked primarily with white, native-born students, Stewart complicated a purely xenophobic or racist understanding of illiteracy. Because she worked primarily with older students, she challenged the dominant idea that adults were too old to learn a complex skill such as reading, while also pressuring a model of literacy that increasingly naturalized learning to read with other developmental milestones in the life of a child. And because she received little to no public funding for her programs and relied on volunteer teachers, she disrupted the notion that educational reform could only be conducted under the auspices of bureaucrats and experts in the 1920s and 1930s.

My approach to Stewart departs slightly from those taken by NeCamp and Baldwin: rather than focusing on the bulk of Stewart's writings that explain the problem of illiteracy to the literate ranks of educators, philanthropists, and politicians, I am interested in Stewart's textbooks, which explain the problem of illiteracy to an *illiterate* audience. This distinction in audience is central to my reading of Stewart's primers, which I argue address their readers as "illiterate" even as they learn to read. This rhetorical move not only mobilizes the shame associated with adult illiteracy as a spur toward learning to read, but also, by perverse effect, shows students just how flexible, contingent, and performative labels like "illiterate" and "literate" actually are. Through a coordinated use of illustrations, printed text, and handwriting lessons, Stewart's books stage encounters between the non-reader and a literate world, revealing in the process how "literacy" entails much more than reading and writing. In their candor and directness, Stewart's books provide a template for understanding literacy as a practice of self-authoring and self-performance, one whose seemingly inert boundaries are in fact built on porous ground. By exposing the myths of literacy while also upholding their grandeur, Stewart acts as a traditional gatekeeper even as she shows her students a secret back door into the privileged terrain of the "literate."

Reading as a Non-reader

With large print, wide margins, and a layout that pairs illustrations with simple sentences and vocabulary terms, Stewart's books borrow plainly from the conventions of the American reading primer, which, since *The New England Primer* (1687-90), has persisted in a remarkably stable form.⁶⁸ Where Stewart's texts make a radical departure from the genre is in their intended audience. While most primers are written with primary-school-aged children in mind, Stewart's

⁶⁸ Venezy's "From the Indian Primer to Dick and Jane: An Introduction to the UPA American Primers Collection" offers a succinct yet thorough history of the changes and continuities within this particular print genre.

are written for adults, and this change in audience has important ramifications for both the content of the books and their pedagogy. In terms of content, Stewart recalibrated the typical children's primer in order to account for the adult student's more mature interests. Stewart's were not the first reading instructional texts created with adult "illiterates" in mind. In the years immediately preceding the creation of the Moonlight Schools, instructors in urban night schools had begun to create their own sets of texts with a different adult student in mind. Books such as Frances S. Mintz's *The New American Citizen*, Peter Roberts's *English for Coming Americans*, and Madeline Faustine and Mary E. Wagner's *A New Reader for Evening Schools* (all published in 1909) build their lessons around subjects that they presumed would be of importance to an urban, working-class, recently immigrated student body. While Stewart knew of these books, she nevertheless rejected them for her first students. The Appalachian farmers she initially taught "demand textbooks which deal with the problems of rural life and which reflect rural life," she writes (3). The same thinking informed her later books for "soldiers," "Indians," and "mothers," all of which structured their lessons around topics that the author imagined would resonate with their target audience.

Tailoring a textbook's contents to a specific audience did more than generate and maintain student interest. Reading instructors increasingly came to understand that a student not only learned *how* to read from a primer, but also inevitably learned *what* he or she was reading (something that the reading test makers of Chapter 1 counted on). Stewart described this second function of a textbook as part of its "double purpose": "the primary one of teaching the pupil to read, and at the same time that of imparting instruction in the things that vitally affected him in his daily life" (MS 71). For a recent immigrant learning to read in an urban night school, those vital lessons might include navigating the city, working in a factory, or pursuing naturalization;

for the rural adult student, the lessons fashioned by Stewart included farming techniques, land conservation, housekeeping, hygiene, and local political participation.

Critical readings of Stewart's books and other reading primers tend to focus on the socializing content of their lessons.⁶⁹ For example, NeCamp says of Stewart's tailored curriculum, "Literacy was but one among many knowledges that the Moonlight Schools sought to provide, and though Stewart considered literacy essential to social advancement, she also saw a basic knowledge of history, math, and hygiene, in particular, as equally important" (47). However, I argue in the following reading of Stewart's books that we should not frame these lessons as being taught in addition to or alongside reading. As we will see, literacy is not presented as one among many types of knowledge, but instead, all other knowledges—such as farming and hygiene—are presented *as a part of* literacy. In my reading of Stewart's primers, their instruction in what we might actually consider reading ability—that is, to borrow a definition from a test maker in the previous chapter, "the ability to get meaning from the printed page" (Kelly 63)—is not as important as their instruction in the performance of a specific way of "being a reader," a practice that signifies in broad areas of daily personal and intrapersonal practice. Stewart's conception of a "double purpose" downplays the extent to which her two purposes inevitably fold into one another: reading (or not being able to read) has vital effects on daily life, and those other vital knowledges and practices reduce down to reading.

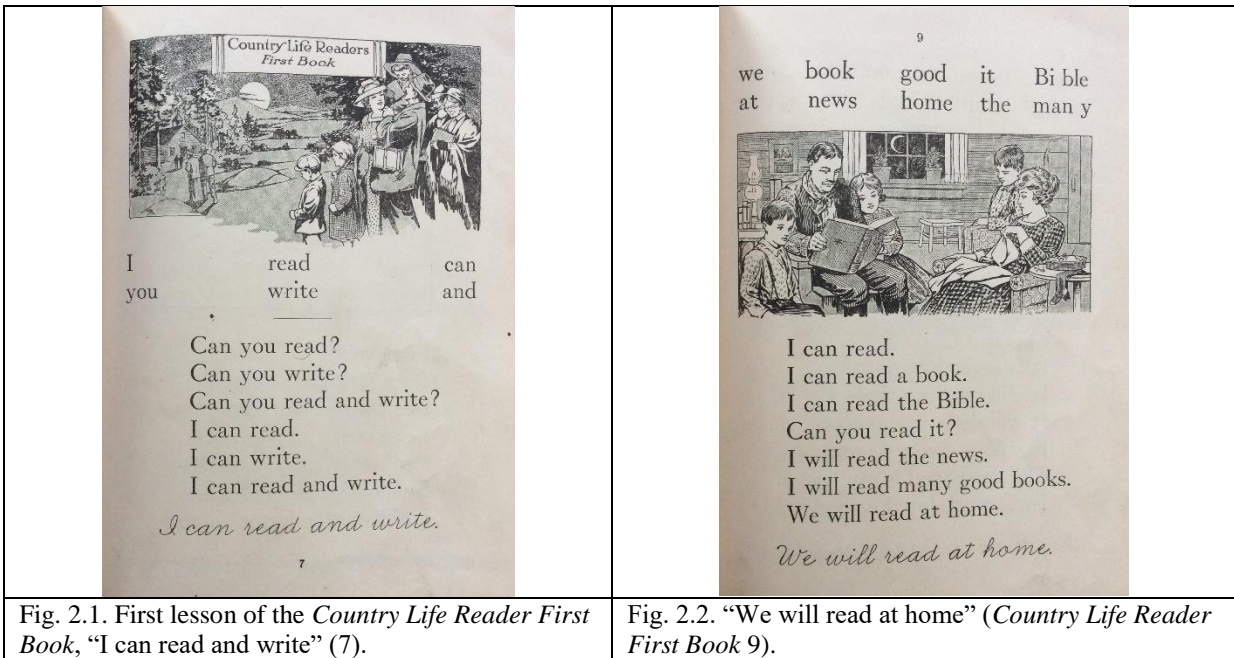
Because reading signifies so broadly in Stewart's books, the shame of not being able to read is particularly trenchant. Not only does this shame surface on the level of content in lessons that explicitly stigmatize illiteracy, but it also appears in the primers' calculated interplay between illustration and text. Stewart recognized that learning to read as an adult was, from the

⁶⁹ See, for example, Mosier or Westerhoff on the *McGuffey Readers* or Luke on the *Dick and Jane* books.

very start, a potentially disgraceful undertaking, even “without the humiliation of reading from a child’s primer with its lessons on kittens, dolls and toys,” and she used this thinking in adjusting the content of her textbooks (*MS 23*). While she has eschewed illustrations of kittens and dolls, she still includes illustrations in her books, and, I will argue, she uses them to great effect to formalize the difference between an “illiterate” and “literate” engagement with the page and, subsequently, with the world. Because illustrations have always been a central feature of American reading primers, their presence in beginners’ texts is as expected as their absence in sophisticated, literary materials. Our understanding of illustrations as secondary to text is a conditioned assumption, one that has been naturalized by the typical process of learning to read. As our reading skill increases, we graduate to materials with more words and fewer pictures. The “picture book” is a beginner’s genre, one whose form is premised on the now-centuries-old assumption that the untrained reader needs some other point of entry into a book: illustrations catch the eye, capture attention, and entice the new reader even as the text remains unintelligible. A corollary to this first assumption about the superiority of text is that illustrations are easily interpretable via processes that do not depend on textual literacy, that pictures speak in a different way from words—and that they speak to those who cannot read words. Combined, these two initial assumptions about textual superiority and the relative ease of reading pictures allows us to envision how Stewart might have imagined an illiterate reader encountering her books: namely, as two books, one that communicates meaning through its illustrations and the other that speaks with words. As advanced readers, we take these two versions of the book together, moving between image and text in order to understand the whole page at once. For the beginning reader, however, the images and the text stand on opposite sides of a huge divide, and to be limited to the picture book and barred from the text makes every page a reminder of one’s

illiteracy. In the reading I offer below, I interpret the illustrations in Stewart's primers as a pre-literate version of the book that the student is encouraged to leave behind and then look down upon as she learns to decipher the text. As learning to read requires first confronting the shame of not being able to read, "being a reader" opens up new, textual ways of judging the world around you.

Stewart's first textbooks, the *Country Life Readers* (1915), are particularly skillful in using illustrations and text to model different affective responses to the act of reading. Taken on their own, the illustrations that appear on almost every page of the first and second books of the *Country Life* series tell a straightforward story. The illustrations communicate an idealized version of white, rural life, an ideal that is closely linked to reading and writing. The first illustration of the first book sets this tone. Above the lesson's simple sentences is an illustration of a neatly dressed family approaching a school house set within some trees below a shining full moon (fig. 2.1) (1.7). The age of the figures in the image range from a young child in the father's arms to an elderly couple trailing behind the family, suggesting that attending school at any age is not grounds for humiliation, but rather an important occasion in the life of the individual, the family, and the community. The rhetoric of the initial lessons emphasizes this point: while "I can read and write" is the climax of the first lesson, a few pages later the "I" becomes a "we" in "We will read at home," suggesting that the individual benefits of literacy pay immediate dividends to the entire family unit. Once again, in this later lesson, the illustration reinforces this point, as the family is now in a cozy living room, where the father is reading to the mother and children (fig. 2.2). With these and other illustrations, the *Country Life Readers* make no attempt at subtlety in communicating a clear connection between literacy and living a particularly desirable type of life.



As the book moves on, the illustrations continue to elaborate this vision of rural life for every member of the nuclear family. Men are hard at work building thriving farms (1.20), women are keeping clean and healthy homes (1.46), and children are participating in the life of the community (1.28, 1.30).⁷⁰ Domestic scenes take place in well-appointed dining rooms and kitchens equipped with indoor plumbing, spaces that serve as natural backdrops for the capable housewife who appears throughout this home (2.74, 2.76, 2.78). Illustrations related to lessons on agriculture or horticulture show large pieces of arable land, neatly compartmentalized according to the principles of crop diversification, and with technologies such as silos and orchard sprayers that represent advances on more primitive farming techniques (2.27, 2.32). With one exception, every figure is white, and almost every figure is dressed in the understated, every-day attire of the middle class. In slight tension with the apparent comfort of this lifestyle, very few figures are shown at rest in any of the *Readers*. Instead, man, woman, and child are all

⁷⁰ For citations from the *Country Life Readers*, I will indicate first the volume number (corresponding to the First Book, Second Book, and Third Book of the series), then the page number.

hard at work—just as the student-reader is hard at work learning to read—in order to improve self, family, and community.

In addition to the positive illustrations of rural life, there are also plenty of negative examples of failures to live up to the examples set in the *Readers'* pages. One such example centers on the story of a woman who cannot cook nourishing foods to save her sick husband. In the accompanying illustration, a woman in shabby clothes stands in shadow at the foreground of an image of the inside of a wooden house. With the cabinet doors standing open, the windows undressed, and dirty dishes strewn on the table, the room bespeaks a definite deficiency in homekeeping. A male figure, the doctor, stands in the open doorway scolding this inept wife. The text confirms what the illustration has already shown through its treatment of the woman, that, tellingly, her inability to cook and care for her husband stems from her inability to read. The doctor in the story says to himself upon leaving the house, “No woman ought to marry who cannot cook all kinds of foods,” but we might as well replace “cook all kinds of foods” with “read a recipe” (2.90). In the very next lesson, a different woman helps the hapless, illiterate wife (and presumably saves the latter’s husband) by reading recipes aloud to her. An image of a poor tenant farmer offers a similar counterexample to the successful male figures in the books (2.119). In this illustration, an older male figure sits alone in front of a window whose shutter hangs lopsided on its hinge. He looks dejectedly down at the ground in front of him, but the reader can see outside of his small shelter and into the distance, where neat squares of land speak of the fortune of more successful farmers (2.119). Again, the sadness of the illustration primes the reader for a rejection of what has made him so sad (in this case, tenant farming), and the placement of a better possibility in the distant background of the image offers the reader a more alluring alternative.

Although it is nearly impossible to say what actual students would have thought of these illustrations of country life, the books, at least, go to great lengths to encourage the student reader to connect the illustrated world of the *Country Life Readers* with his or her own lived experience. Most of the visual material in the books takes the form of simple line drawings, which makes the occasional use of a photograph a potent reminder that the idealized vision of the illustrations can—and in many cases has already—become real. Photographs appear most often to show the types of positive infrastructure improvements that Stewart connected to literacy: for example, a thriving chicken farm (2.40), a bumper crop of alfalfa (2.42), an improved road (2.67) or a moonlight school classroom (2.144). Conversely, photographs are also used to show negative situations in need of repair, e.g., destruction wrought by a forest fire (1.74), a one-crop farmer standing amid shaggy, slouching crops (2.30), or a man standing forlornly outside of a house without a porch (2.112). The photographic evidence of poor rural living conditions may be imagined as a spur to the student to seek out such sites for improvement in his own community. In essence, the photos give the student-reader concrete examples of what to be ashamed of in her daily living as well as proof that those conditions can be changed.

As I described above, my reading of the visual material in the *Country Life Readers* depends on an assumption about the implicit superiority of text over image. The illustrations of the *Country Life Readers* do not require “reading” in the same way that text does; rather, their messages of hard work and personal responsibility are presumed to be self-apparent and uncomplicated, even to the illiterate adult. However, as soon as the student gains entrance into the world of the text, she finds herself activated within the text’s much more complicated matrix of observation, interpretation, and judgment. What start as simple illustrations become the

canvas on which the newly literate reader can begin to reauthorize herself as an agent of interpretation.

The change from illiterate to literate begins with a simple textual directive: to look. Many of the early lessons in the *Country Life Readers* demand that the reader “See this wagon!” (1.15) or “Look at this tree!” (1.18) or “See my new toothbrush!” (1.45), and as the text asks the reader to look, the illustrations reiterate the imperative by further modeling what “looking” looks like. On one page, for example, two men pass by a wagon in disrepair, and one of the men points to it from his own working wagon as they both look upon the scene (fig. 2.3). On a similar page later in the first book, a couple on horseback follow a road in front of a wobbly house with an unkempt front yard; the man’s head is turned slightly to the woman as if he is speaking to her while he points out what he sees about the house (fig. 2.4). In both cases, the text’s instructions “to look” subtly change what would normally be the focus of each illustration. Rather than taking the wagon or the house as the illustrations’ focal points, the reader is made keenly aware of both her own position as a viewer and the presence of other viewers within the images’ frames.



Fig. 2.3. Illustration of “Keep your wagon under shelter” (*Country Life Reader First Book* 15).

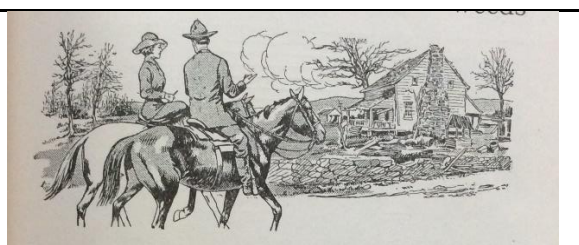


Fig. 2.4. Illustration of “Lazy, shiftless people live in dirty, ugly homes” (*Country Life Reader First Book* 25).

As the student reader continues with the lesson, the text continues to make demands on the student’s sympathies and positionality. In the lesson on the wagon, for example (fig. 2.5), the text requires the student-reader to speak from the position of the man on the working wagon, where he not only calls attention to another’s failure—“See this wagon! John bought it a year

ago. It looks like an old, old wagon. John does not keep it under shelter”—but also announces his own virtue—“I bought my wagon six years ago. It looks good as new. I keep it under shelter” (15). As seasoned readers, we perhaps take for granted this sort of ventriloquism, in which we take on the voice and point-of-view of a character in a text, but imagine the newness of this experience for the adult beginning reader. Whether the student-reader actually has a well-kept wagon or not, the act of reading aloud has given him a space in which to become the responsible “I” of the passage, and the self-satisfaction that might come from learning to read is matched by the self-satisfaction of caring for one’s material possessions. Simply “looking” at the illustration cannot achieve the same depth of meaning—or the same assumption of responsibility—as “reading” can.

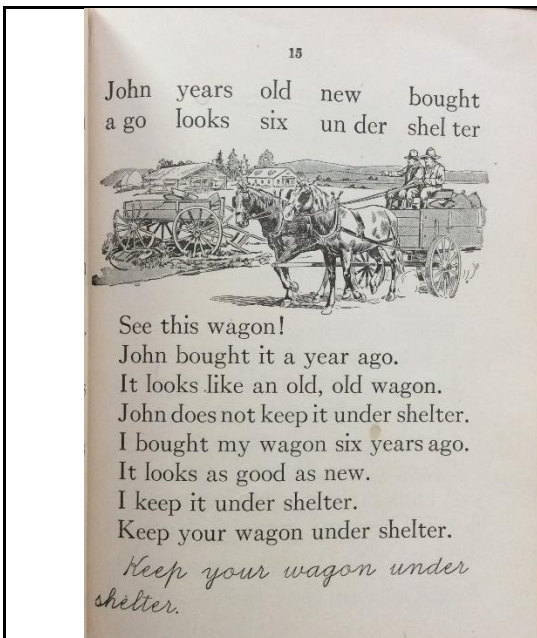


Fig. 2.5. Full page of “Keep your wagon under shelter” (*Country Life Reader First Book* 15).

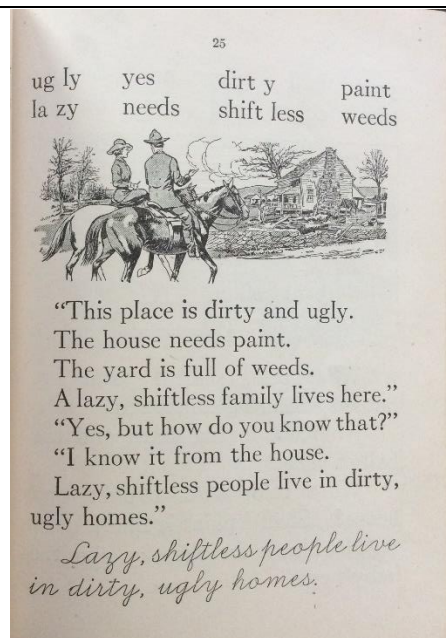


Fig. 2.6. Full page of “Lazy, shiftless people live in dirty, ugly homes” (*Country Life Reader First Book* 25).

The image of the horseback couple expands on this basic dynamic of reading one’s way into a position of superiority over others (fig. 2.6). Once again, the reader has access to aspects of this scene that the viewer of the image does not; namely, the reader is invited to intone along

with the man on the horse, “Lazy, shiftless people live in dirty, ugly homes” (25). The introduction of quotation marks in this lesson (their first appearance in the primer) further reinforces the power of reading to grant access to previously shut-off positions. As the quotation marks visually set this dialogue apart from the rest of the page, they might signal a sort of privacy or closedness to the conversation; in them, the barriers of illiteracy take on a textual-spatial form. For the non-reader, there is no way through the quotation marks and into this discourse, but for the reader, such barriers no longer exist. The student-reader can easily move within the quotation marks, eavesdropping on (if reading silently) or joining in (if reading aloud) the couple’s condemning remarks. Again, it is worth reflecting on how transparent this dynamic is to a practiced reader. For the adult beginning reader, however, there might be something quite powerful about seeing an image of two people looking on in clear judgment of someone else’s failures, then being able to read one’s way into a similar position of judgment—perhaps for the first time in one’s life. Through reading, she is able to join a conversation—a conversation in which there is a clearly marked gradient of power and respectability that runs from the pictured talkers/observers/readers to the not-pictured mute/observed/illiterates—and to join in on the winning side.

By linking reading with knowledge, judgment, and respectability, the *Country Life Readers* instruct their adult students to understand reading of all sorts—reading printed text as well as reading the lived-in environment around them—as an instrument of power. Over and over again, as the student-reader makes her way through the first and second *Country Life* books, she is verbally empowered to pass judgment on those around her. Of the misinformed voter, she says, “The man who sells his vote sells his honor” (1.53); of the man with a poor garden, she declares, “it is an insult to God and nature, as well as a disgrace to man” (2.11). These sorts of

verbal pronouncements are coupled with illustrations that either invite the reader to look down on others from a position of exterior superiority or position the reader within a better version of each scene. In the analogue to the “dirty, ugly” house lesson, a “neat and clean” house provides an image of respectability for the reader to take in (1.24). Notably, there are no figures in the illustration of the clean house, leaving open the possibility for the reader to take full ownership of the house before her. Wherever the reader positions herself, she is able to avoid the judgmental gaze of the text only by aligning herself with its precepts.

As the images in the *Country Life Readers* provide a visual vocabulary with which the student-reader can imagine a better life, the text—newly decipherable to the student-reader as he learns to read—provides him with a set of instructions that will ensure that he fits into these images. This script quite often takes the form of a dialogue that provides the reader with two subject positions meant to ease the transition from ignorance to knowledge. Consider, for example, the following lesson in which two men discuss the soil of a worn-out farm:

“What wore out the soil?”
“The farmer raised the same crop on it year after year.”
“Could he have saved the soil?”
“He could if he had tried.”
“Tell me how so that I may save my soil.”
“Rotate your crops and it will save your soil.”
“What do you mean when you say rotate your crops?” (1.38-39)

Upon a first reading, the student may find himself more aligned with the speaker with more questions than answers, but with the lesson’s final line—“I see! I will rotate my crops”—the question-poser has come into the knowledge of the more expert speaker. Having read the lesson once, the reader can now adopt the more expert stance of the other speaker, a shift in textual positionality meant to mirror the real-life advance in position that comes (so the books argue) with learning to read. The question-and-answer structure also appears in dialogues between

women in lessons that tend to focus on domestic management and personal hygiene. In a typical lesson, one woman explains to another how she takes a bath every day (1.46); in another, one woman chastises another for always frying her meat (1.59). Both lessons end with a similar pledge to better living that the student must read and copy: “I will take a bath every day” and “I will cook meat many ways” (1.47, 1.59). Cora Wilson Stewart called these future-tense pledges the “key-notes” of each lesson and considered them central to the corrective work of the *Country Life Readers*: “The copying of the script sentences in the book pledged the student to progress and impressed upon him certain evils with fine psychological effect” (MS 72). The collected pledges of the first book of the *Country Life Readers* (table 2.1) provide a schematic view of the progress made possible by literacy, a life lived in the future tense of the “I will” statements, a time set dramatically apart from the reader’s pre-literate past.

Table 2.1. All of the “I will” key-note sentences from the first book of the Country Life Readers.	
I will write a letter to you (8)	I will plow my land well (40)
We will read at home (9)	I will get rid of boll weevil (43)
I will work for the good road (10)	I will brush my teeth and save them (45)
I will get rid of the bad road (11)	I will take a bath every day (47)
I will build a silo (14)	I will kill you, Mr. Fly (49)
I will keep my money in bank (16)	I will pipe water into my house and save my wife (56)
I will spray my fruit trees and raise fine fruit (19)	I will not make bread the same way every day (58)
I will be wise like Farmer Brown (21)	I will cook meat many ways (59)
I will show my taste by painting my house a soft color (27)	I will cook corn many ways (64)
I will work for a prize (31)	I will cook potatoes many ways (66)
I will test my seed corn (34)	I will enjoy wild flowers (68)
I will take a newspaper and read it (35)	I will get rid of weeds (69)
I will rotate my crops (39)	I will not cut down the forest (72)

Dialogic lessons between expert and non-expert speakers provide a scaffold based on sociability and amiability for the student-reader to willingly work his or her way up to the precepts of literate living. However, the texts also take measures to ensure that the unwilling or resisting reader also finds her way into the logic of textual judgment and superiority. The *Readers* again use a dialogic structure to address anticipated resistance, but this type of dialogue

takes place *within* a single reader. In her memoir, Stewart admits to designing certain lessons to exploit a potential reader's negative reaction to them. Most of these more nuanced moves draw a distinct boundary between illiteracy and literacy, then make the student-reader question his own position within that field by staging a debate between his "illiterate" and "literate" selves. In a lesson on taxation, "the cause of much unintelligent complaint," according to Stewart, the text of the lesson manages to first confirm, then challenge what the average reader might think about taxes while aligning the act of reading with the more rational response. The text of the lesson is as follows:

I shall pay my taxes.
I pay a tax on my home.
I pay a tax on my land.
I pay a tax on my cattle.
I pay a tax on my money.
I pay a tax on many other things.
Where does all this money go?
It goes to keep up the schools.
It goes to keep up the roads.
It goes to keep down crime.
It goes to keep down disease.
I am glad that I have a home to pay taxes on. (1.22)

The first six lines of this lesson would seem familiar to any tax-weary reader. However, what at first reads like a litany of complaints against taxation is abruptly recontextualized from personal burden to public good as the last six lines explicitly discipline the first. Stewart describes the whiplash caused by the sudden turn in this lesson in her memoir:

The climax of this lesson was truly as much a surprise to the readers as any fiction. As they read of the many things on which they paid taxes and the query, "Where does all this money go?" they expected denunciation to follow, such as the demagogues revel in to confuse and inflame the minds of ignorant voters. Instead they found a reminder and an explanation of the benefits derived from wise and just taxation. (MS 74)

If the first lines are the complaints of an illiterate man, the last six are the reasoned responses of the literate, and the ultimate meaning of the lesson can only be grasped if the reader is able to change from one state to the other. By reading this lesson from start to finish, the reader is able to experience both of these responses—first the familiar, then the perhaps more challenging or surprising—but, crucially, no matter where he starts, he ends on the side of reading. That sort of change of mind is out of reach for the “ignorant [presumably illiterate] voter,” who does not benefit from reading’s ability to upset old assumptions about the world, to enact this internal call-and-response between two halves of the reader. The drama of this upset plays out in real time as the reader moves from a state of ignorance to knowledge brought directly by reading.

As a further example of this strategy of confronting the reader’s assumptions and insecurities through text, Stewart recalls a similar moment from the early days of the Moonlight Schools. Before the *Readers* were published, students read their lessons from a small newsletter published by the teachers of the schools, and one of these early newsletters contained the sentence, “The best people on earth live in Rowan County” (*MS 22*). “Provincial though this may seem to some and flattery to others,” writes Stewart, “it had the desired effect of keeping the interest at white heat.” She even writes of “one old man” who “openly expressed his approval” of the sentence. Stewart does not end the story there, however, but instead continues to a later sentence in the book: “The man who does not learn to read and write is not a good citizen and would not fight for his country if it needed him” (*MS 22*). Stewart records the same man’s reaction:

The old man who had exulted in being one of those “best people on earth,” became very thoughtful after reading it, and then resumed his study with grim determination. (*MS 23*)

Like the reader surprised by the defense of taxation, or any of the other surprises contained in Stewart's lessons,⁷¹ the old man in this anecdote finds himself disciplined and humbled by the very instrument—reading—that he hopes will raise him up. Through the newly acquired lens of reading, then, he is forced to reevaluate his previous ideas about the world. This is the same dynamic described above with the illustrations and texts of the *Country Life Readers*: through the act of reading, the new reader confronts a familiar scene from a previously inaccessible point of view. Then he must choose whether to realign his habits with those of his new station or remain the same, but with a knowledge that makes those old ways newly shameful. As reading puts pressure on old areas of pride—regional allegiances, ideals of manliness, personal bearing—a constant tension between the blossoming dignity of literacy and lingering feelings of inadequacy and backwardness disciplines the new reader.

As we might expect, this tension is dramatized to its fullest extent in lessons that explicitly reference the act of reading. The most notable comes in the second *Country Life* book in the lesson “Some Big Farmers” (2.49-50). The lesson begins, “Have you read of the life and work of Luther Burbank?” then proceeds to ask the reader about other men who have made meaningful contributions to agricultural science. After asking about “the alfalfa man” and “the corn king,” the text responds to the student-reader’s presumed ignorance:

You say that you don’t know any of these? Haven’t you read about any of them? What do you read about if you do not read about the big farmers in your farm books and farm papers?

You don’t read anything! Well, one might have known that by looking at your farm. What a farmer reads shows in his farm. (2.50)

⁷¹ The tax lesson is obvious enough for Stewart to use as an example for her own readers, but it is hard to say how many other lessons in the *Country Life Readers* would have packed a similar surprise. For example, Stewart describes how one of her volunteer teachers noted that “brushing her teeth was a performance viewed with wonder” by the rural households that she visited. As such, the lesson “consecrated to the tooth-brush” might have been received with similar wonderment (MS 74-75).

Unlike the dialogic passages, which offer the reader multiple positions to occupy in the conversation, this lesson leaves no place for the reader to hide from the speaker's scolding. Rather, the silent negative answers that the reader is presumed to give prompt some of the harshest words of the entire *Country Life* series. The truly indicting line is the final one (which is also presented in script for copying): "What a farmer reads shows in his farm" (2.50). This verdict stings in two ways. First, it suggests that literacy directly affects a person's material well-being: the illiterate farmer is not only illiterate, the lesson teaches, but also a horrible farmer.⁷² Second, and perhaps more important, the lesson explicitly identifies something that the *Country Life Readers* have argued throughout their lessons: that just as we have read about others, we are always at risk of being read *by someone else*. Literacy, therefore, entails an awareness and management of both sides of this equation: just as we read everything around us, we must be mindful of the "text" we construct for others to read.

This emphasis on constructing a text via written performance importantly distinguishes Stewart's books from other contemporaneous reading primers. Children's primers, still indebted to the recitation model of reading instruction, continued to build their lessons around reading aloud. The popular *Elson Primary School Reader: Book One* (1912), for example, tells teachers in an introduction, "While these stories are simple, they have been chosen largely for their dramatic quality. They are therefore valuable for purposes of oral reproduction" (5). Such an instructional note is the rule rather than the exception in primers, many of which incorporate elements of oral performance into the texts of their lessons.⁷³ Writing is nowhere to be found in

⁷² The immediate response to this scolding lesson appears on the following page. In a template letter intended to be written out as practice by the student, the writer addresses the editor of a "valuable journal" on farming and requests a year's subscription (51).

⁷³ The *Holton-Curry Primer* (1917), for example, is full of onomatopoeic animal sounds—"G-r-r-r" (18), "Chip-chip" (49), "Baa, baa" (89)—as well as exclamations such as "Ha ha ha!" (16), that lend more dramatics to reading aloud. Such verbal elements are also a way for the *Primer* to incorporate phonics lessons in the midst of its otherwise whole-word instructional approach. A page that prompts students to "Say what the letters say," then

these primers, an omission that may stem simply from the fact that very young readers have not developed the motor skills necessary to wield a pen, but that nevertheless separates writing from acquiring literacy. The more telling comparison comes from other adult primers, typically those intended for use in urban evening school classrooms with English-language-learning immigrants. These textbooks often announced their emphasis on spoken literacy at the expense of written. Part of this pedagogy was practical, as it was generally considered to be much easier to learn to read a language if a student could already speak it. Focusing on spoken skills, however, also stemmed from a common assumption about the extent of the literacy necessary for the students who would use such books. Lee and Page, in their *Living English for New Americans* (1924), go so far as to invert the usual hierarchy of literacy practices and explicitly place orality over textuality in the case of the “new American”:

To teach the new American to read English correctly is a worthy accomplishment; to teach him to read it with full understanding is to endow him with power; but to teach him to speak it is to bestow upon him the cipher that unlocks the door of opportunity and reveals to him the true meaning of America. (v)

While the authors suggest practical forms of reading for immigrant students—signs such as *Exit* or *Fire Escape*, or notices posted in street cars with instructions on making transfers (xiv)—they assume that speaking is the primary form of English literacy that an immigrant “illiterate” in a night school would need. Many texts were able to shroud the racism behind such assumptions in a veil of utilitarianism, as Roberts does in his teachers’ manual when he asks, “What ratio does the practice of writing bear to that of speaking in your life? What is the relative importance of speaking, reading and writing in the life of the average day laborer in America?” (73). The presumed answer to these questions was that in the daily life of the beginning English learner,

presents such drills as “fun - f fox - f,” and “girl - g good - g,” explicitly makes this “sounding-out” process integral to learning to read (106).

his interactions would be mediated primarily through speech, with reading reserved for such tasks as way-finding through a city or reading safety signs in factories.

One telling exception to this general rule about the role of writing in primers for English-language-learning adults comes from the *Army Lessons in English* (1920), a set of six readers and workbooks designed for use in the U.S. Army's Recruit Education Center in Camp Upton, NY.⁷⁴ The *Army Lessons* books, intended for use in mixed classrooms with both illiterate native English speakers and English language learners, are built around letter-writing: each of the beginning lessons asks students to practice stock sentences, then combine them into letters home to parents, sweethearts, and friends. In the same way that certain scenes in the *Country Life* books allow for the student to read himself into newfound spaces of respectability, the letters in *Army Lessons* allow for the student to write himself into similar subject positions. Garry Cleveland Myers, the psychologist and teacher who developed *Army Lessons*, theorized this dynamic in a 1921 article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* tellingly titled "Control of Conduct by Suggestion." He notes that the *Army Lessons* make it so that "the learner is not told" how to behave, but instead "the learner becomes the reader or the writer of a letter to a friend in which he tells that he has developed these desirable traits, attitudes and virtues" (26). Myers calls this process "a dramatization" in which students learn to act the part of literate soldiers well before they might pass a literacy test. As evidence of these protean performances, Myers

⁷⁴ The REC was charged with the explicit purpose of educating and "Americanizing" illiterate and non-English-speaking enlistees, so the *Army Lessons* do address themselves to a different adult non-reading audience than the *Country Life* books (Stewart's students were assumed to be native English speakers). Nevertheless, the *Army Lessons* books and the *Country Life Readers* bear a distinct family resemblance. Garry Cleveland Myers, the army psychologist and educational researcher behind the *Army Lessons*, echoes Stewart's notion of "double purpose" when he writes, "Every lesson, while primarily a lesson in reading and writing, is at the same time a lesson in history, civics, hygiene and other elementary knowledge essential to making the men useful Americans" (6). As with Stewart's textbooks, this intent is legible on every page of Myers's books. Incidentally, Myers is much better known for his work as a child psychologist and as the founder and publisher (along with his wife) of the magazine, *Highlights for Children* (first published in 1946).

includes some actual letters home in his article. These student letters speak volumes while saying nothing at all: as Myers points out, they are mere collages of the textbook's phrases and sentiments: e.g., "This is my first letter to you"; "I have a good Captain"; "Every soldier likes to handle a gun." But the emptiness of the phrases does not bother Myers—in fact, he admits that many students probably had little initial interest or belief in the material they wrote home. What mattered more than what they wrote at first was that they were writing at all, that they were presenting themselves as American soldiers who write letters home. Myers observed that the "traits, attitudes, and virtues" prescribed by the lessons would develop later, out of this primary identification as a reader and writer. Print literacy thus serves as both the medium and the message here, as the means for controlling conduct by suggestion even as it signifies or suggests forms of conduct to others.

Myers's strategy to use letter-writing to prompt his soldier-students into dramatizations of a literate lifestyle is very much anticipated in Stewart's books and their emphasis on writing. Stewart demanded that every student learn how to sign his or her name by the end of the very first class, and she kept track of how many students had completed her course and become "literate" by the number of hand-written letters she received from students (NeCamp 45, 23). Not only do her books adhere to a more conventional understanding of reading and writing as higher order literacy practices, but each of Stewart's books also teach that, even more than reading, *writing* is the ultimate practice that distinguishes the "illiterate" from the "literate" woman or man. Furthermore, Stewart's writing lessons, like Myers's, are intended as dramatizations. The script "key-note" sentences at the ends of many of the *Country Life Readers'* lessons allow students to rehearse the "traits, attitudes, and virtues" of literacy while simultaneously thematizing performance:

I will show my taste by painting my house a soft color. (1.27)

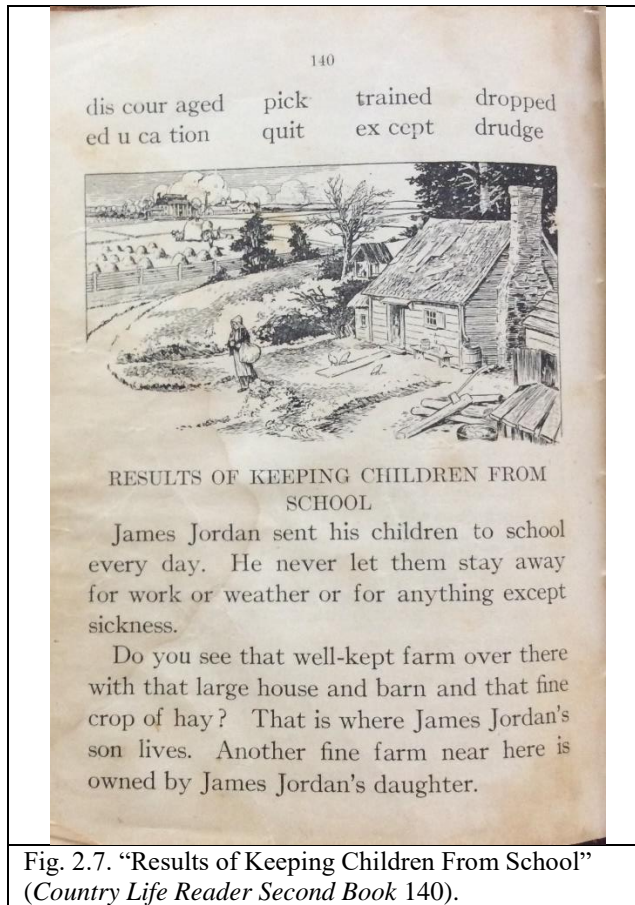
A yard with neat, white beehives around it makes one think of a shrewd farmer who gets something to work for him without wages. (2.16)

A clean baby makes people think well of the mother. (2.98)

These acts of “showing” or “making others think” are in fact meant to be copied out twice: in pen and ink and in the materials of the student-reader’s daily life. Additionally, the effective practice of literacy requires a constant, iterative re-reading and re-writing of one’s lived text. The “texts” that result from this lesson in copying—one in the student’s hand, the other in the student’s house, farm, and family—*both* signify literacy (and all that literacy itself signifies) because *both* demonstrate the student-reader’s ability to read, understand, and act on textual information. This is the ultimate reading lesson in the *Country Life Readers*: that full literacy requires a reorientation of one’s standards of living away from old folkways, habits, and superstitions, and toward a rubric of respectability *that is only accessible through print* but that is *legible in the materials of everyday life*. The poor farm is a reflection of both the poor farmer *and* his illiteracy, and crucially, these two seemingly independent aspects of the farmer’s self-identity are, according to the *Country Life Readers*, mutually constitutive *and* mutually signifying. If the student’s home’s appearance, his wife’s cooking, his daughter’s tomatoes, or his crop’s yield do not reach the standards set out in print by the *Country Life Readers*, then he has failed to live up to the book’s idea of “literate,” no matter how well he can read.

The Limits of Being a Reader

In the midst of all of the “I will” statements of Stewart’s textbooks, it is easy to lose track of what the new reader presumably “will not.” While the *Country Life Readers* undoubtedly argue that literacy can serve as the means to a better life, the books cannot suppress traces of how this new rural literacy is circumscribed by preexisting stereotypes or social pressures. A telling example of this fact comes in the second book of the series in a lesson called “Results of Keeping Children From School” (fig. 2.7). The illustration at the top of the lesson shows a small home in the foreground and a large estate in the distance; the lesson’s text tells us that while the former is a “small tenant house,” the latter is a “well-kept farm over there with that large house and barn and that fine crop of hay” (2.140-141). The speaker of the lesson addresses the reader as he explains what has led to the different circumstances of these two families: James Jordan insisted that his children go to school every day, but William Bolling often kept his children home and made them work on the farm. A generation later, we are told, the Jordan children have multiplied the wealth and land left them by their father, while the Bolling children live as tenant farmers and maids. The moral of the lesson comes with its final sentence: “Education made the difference in the condition of these two families” (2.141). There is a clear difference in the state of the two families, but one fact remains the same: they have both remained in the country. The best outcome of an education, the lesson suggests, is becoming an excellent farmer, but nothing more than that.



One of the key take-aways from the *Country Life Readers* is that while literacy and education are a means of improvement, they are not necessarily instruments of radical change. The *Readers*' initial promise, stated in the preface to the first book, is "a richer and happier life on the farm"; true to this promise, the *Readers* do not provide a space in which the illiterate rural student might imagine himself as anything other than a farmer (1.3). Even in the series' third and final book, which contains selections from American and British authors on nature, farming, and rural life, the selections are far from pastoral poems or idylls. "Emphasis has been laid on those things which relate to the usefulness and dignity of the farmer and the farmer's wife," the third book's preface reads, "and the importance of their work in the world" (3.1). The importance of work comes through in the book's readings, which, with titles such as "Hemp" (3.72), "The

Value of Tillage,” (3.138), and “Cleanliness” (3.216), remind the reader that labor always remains once the thrills of poems and short stories have passed.

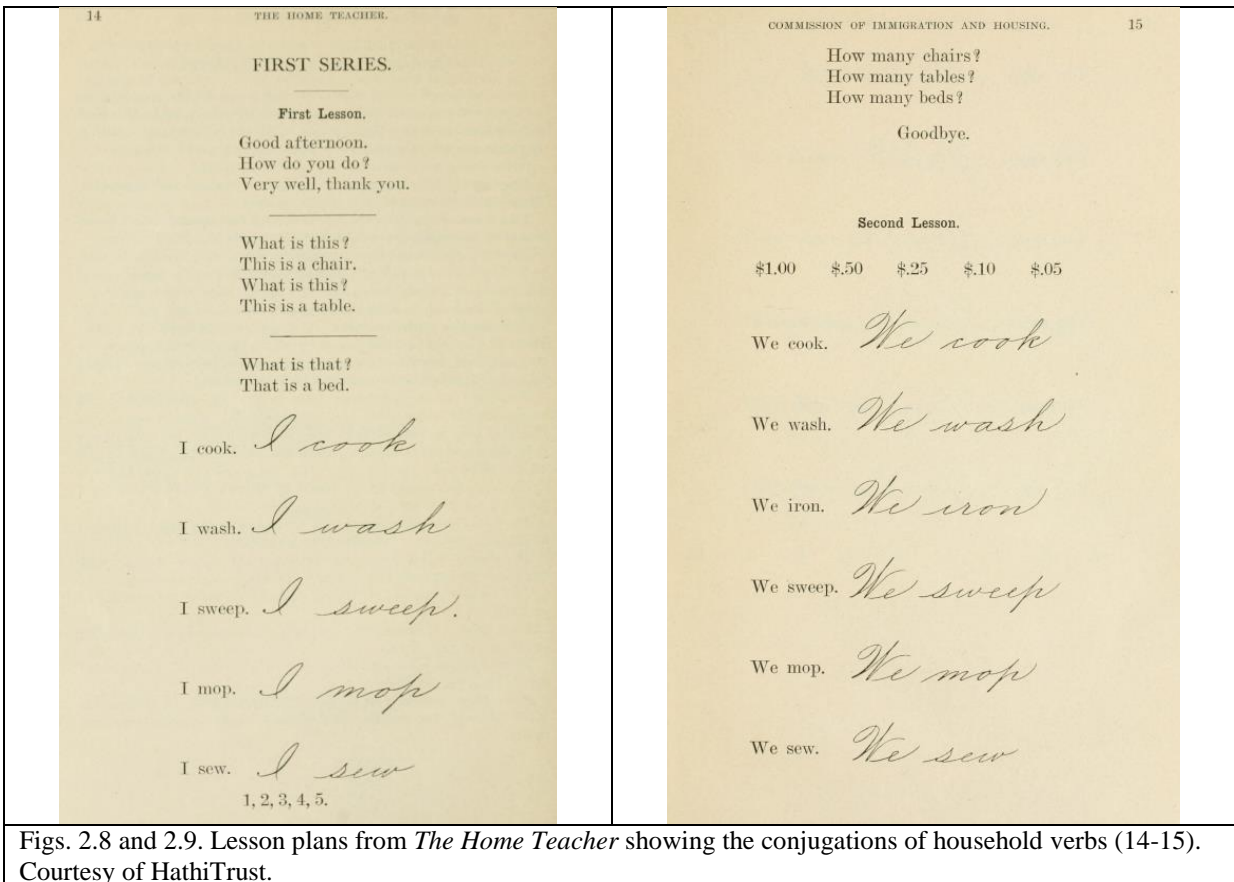
In effect, the *Country Life Readers* equate literacy with very specific ends in such a way that allows for one type of progress to take the place of many others. The work of learning to read does not excuse the student from other forms of work; instead, reading and writing are celebrated in terms of their relevance to rural labor. This is more apparent in the cases of some groups than others. Throughout the *Country Life Readers*, women are encouraged to equate literacy with improvements in their capacity to successfully administer a happy, healthy home, but apart from reading recipes and writing letters to children, there appear to be no other potential uses for reading and writing. Stewart’s later textbook, *A Mother’s First Reader* (1930), continues in this vein. Apart from early lessons that repeat the familiar “I can read. I can write. I can read and write,” reading and writing do not feature prominently among the book’s dialogues on child care, housekeeping, and hygiene. Stewart’s notes to teachers in the book’s preface capture this limited view of the usefulness of reading and writing. “Keep before the pupil this objective: the writing of her first letter” (8). Writing letters, it appears, is the only objective throughout the book, which lacks the *Country Life Readers’* mentions of journals, newspapers, or other forms of print. Tellingly, the book’s few references to other writers further circumscribe the world of the woman reader within the domestic sphere. Two verse selections by Louisa May Alcott, for example, begin “Queen of the tub, I merrily sing” (27), and “I am glad a task to me is given” (42). Even reading and writing of a higher order such as poetry is only introduced in service of the presumably humble aims of domestic labor.

The dissonance between an overriding belief in the power of reading and writing and the narrowness of the literacy imagined in *Mother’s First Book* reveals the rougher edges of

Stewart's vision of literacy. Rather than using reading and writing to re-read and re-write herself as a literate subject, a plan we saw in the *Country Life Readers*, the reader of *Mother's First Book* acquires a much more limited type of ability. In this more constricting view of literacy, Stewart's text actually resembles the Americanization primers for immigrant students much more than we previously noted. A particularly poignant example of a similar lesson, also aimed at women, comes from a teaching guide published by the Commission of Immigration and Housing of California in 1916. *The Home Teacher* provides lesson plans and instructions for a new program that sent public school teachers into private homes to teach both children and adults.⁷⁵ The program specifically targeted immigrant mothers whose house-bound livelihoods made them particularly hard for Americanization efforts to reach. Just as in *Mother's First Book*, *The Home Teacher* recasts a woman's traditional roles as newly "literate" without actually changing the material circumstances of the woman's life. "In English they must cook and sew, sing and weave," the text says in an odd turn of phrase that assimilates domestic labor into the project of literacy-learning (11). Reading and writing also become a part of this project in a way that literally reinscribes the "literate" subject into "illiterate" life. The first series of reading and writing exercises run through a list of common household verbs, conjugating them for the first, second, and third persons (figs. 2.8, 2.9). The thought behind such lessons is not necessarily insidious and reflects the common assumption that lesson content should match a student's lived

⁷⁵ "The Home Teacher Act," passed by the state legislature in 1915, authorized school districts to hire a certain number of teachers to work specifically with adults and children at home. According to its preface, the home teacher movement sought "to bring educational opportunities to the mother directly instead of putting her off with vicarious enlightenment [sic] through her children" (3). The original statute goes on to outline the basic instructional duties of the home teacher: "matters relating to school attendance and preparation therefor; also in sanitation, in the English language, in household duties such as purchase, preparation and use of food and of clothing and in the fundamental principles of the American system of government and the rights and duties of citizenship" (4). The breadth of this proposed curriculum shows the extent to which public school teachers were trusted with the socialization of both children and their parents. Like "the family pastor" and "the family doctor," the home teacher was expected to become "a real and intimate possession of the family" (9).

experiences. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see these pages now and not imagine a woman whose first performance of written literacy is but a retracing of her old labors. Learning to write—becoming “literate”—does not open new spaces for subject-making, but rather immediately reinscribes the student within her narrow, “illiterate” world.



We are faced, then, with another instance of reading and writing serving to both empower and confine, and, as with the constricting literacies of standardized tests, the confinement tends to disproportionately affect specific types of subjects. With *Mother's First Book*, we see gender acting as a check on literacy; in Stewart's *Indian's First Book*, literacy is held in check by race.⁷⁶ In some ways, Stewart's approach to Native subjects is quite sensitive. NeCamp describes how

⁷⁶ *Indian's First Book* was never professionally published, but circulated on reservations in the western states that had made contact with Stewart and her pedagogy (NeCamp 62).

the “I” of the *Indian* lessons differs from the “I” of the *Country Life* or *Mother’s* books. Rather than using the “I” to dictate a purely assimilationist agenda, Stewart writes lessons in which the “I” expresses traditional values and engages in traditional practices that would not normally find such a space in reservation life. Similarly, the sample letters of *Indian’s First Book*, addressed to “Friend Agent” at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, are models of self-sufficient negotiation of the particular challenges facing the imagined reader. However, in the text of one of these short letters, we can begin to see where good intentions are held in check by the presumed limits of these specific acts of literacy:

Friend Agent:

My boy is in pig club. He wants a pig. Please send money to buy him pig. He wants to win prize. He wants pig now. Please send ten dollars of his money now to buy pig. Please send money right away.

Your friend,

[blank line for student to write in his or her name] (21)

With short, simple sentences and elements of non-standard English, such as missing articles or adverbs, the sample letters in *Indian’s First Book* appear to be Stewart’s efforts at transcribing the presumably choppy spoken English of the reservation, rather than the “literate” English of her own world. Thus, as the letters communicate with “Friend Agent” in writing in order to demonstrate a “literate” sophistication, they also reproduce the errors of an “illiterate” spoken English—in fact, the errors seem even more blatant in their written form. So even while the student reader practices lessons such as “I am Indian. I am proud of my race,” she is reminded of her race’s structurally-enforced inferiority and taught only enough to meet but not exceed the pre-existing limits of her situation (19). Like the verb conjugations in *The Home Teacher*, these writing samples reproduce markers of inferiority—in this case, linguistic markers—even as they promise the uplift of literacy.

Arguably, one of Stewart's great skills is in how seamlessly she is able to toggle between these two conflicting notions of the effects of literacy. The ambiguities that arise in her textbooks are further reinforced by the formal mechanisms she authored beyond the page and in the real world of her students. In contrast to the sharp line between literate and illiterate that standardized test developers sought to establish, Stewart's notion of "reading ability" is always a moving target, always contingent on circumstance and relative position. She never tested her students in an objective way, but rather provided them a public stage on which they could reform themselves as "literate" subjects via performances of literateness. One such stage was quite literal, as Stewart shows in her description of a Moonlight School graduation ceremony:

The newly learned gave an exhibition of their recently acquired knowledge. They read and wrote, quoted history and ciphered proudly in the presence of their world. They did it with more pride than ever high school, college or university graduates displayed on their commencement day. (*MS 52*)

Stewart compares the ceremony to a university commencement in order to show its intellectual importance to the students, but a more apt description might be to an old-fashioned revival, where the mechanisms of assessment are much more subjective. As students present their own willingness to be literate in front of Stewart and their peers, their performance of literacy is transmogrified into truth. The analogous mechanics of becoming "literate" and becoming "saved" are most apparent in a scene that Stewart describes as the climax of one town's graduation: "when the Jezebel of the community came forward and accepted her Bible and pledged herself to lead a new life forevermore, there was hardly a dry eye in the house" (*MS 53*). In bearing witness to this miraculous conversion from Jezebel to reader, the community reasserts one of the prime tenets of Stewart's literacy: more important than the quality of literacy achieved is the legibility of that literacy to the wider world. In addition to the literal stages of graduation ceremonies, Stewart also provided more figurative platforms for her students to perform their

literateness. Stewart's memoir, for example, amplifies the reach of her students' performances by their reproducing hand-written letters. On plates scattered through the book, the shaky hands of former students—a woman from Triplet, KY, two farmer brothers from Charley, KY, an inmate in the state prison—circulate through a wider world. Stewart's meticulously self-cultivated archive is another ersatz publication platform in which her students once again find a larger stage and wider audience. In both of these latter examples, it is even more important that her students' performances of literacy are transacted through print, a medium whose circulating ability was previously unavailable to most of Stewart's students.

Just as the public literacy that Stewart professed required public validation, public illiteracy maintained its sting through public disapproval. What began as educational outreach quickly took on shades of community policing, especially as the cost of remaining an "illiterate" was increasingly understood in terms of community health and stability. From the very beginning of the Moonlight School movement, Stewart was very interested in having a complete record of every "illiterate" under her administrative responsibility, and she frequently took censuses of "illiterates" at the school district, county, and even state level.⁷⁷ Under Stewart's direction, each school district in Kentucky eventually had "illiteracy agents" whose job was to keep track of known illiterates and uncover any unknown ones (*MS* 114). This near-obsession of tracking down every illiterate reached a dangerous high in 1914, when Stewart somehow managed to secure a list of Kentucky's "illiterates" from the Federal Census.⁷⁸ In addition to her

⁷⁷ Stewart set great stock in her numerical handle on the illiteracy situation. For example, she writes that after the second Moonlight School campaign, "of the 1,152 illiterates in the county, only 23 were left, and these were classified; six were blind or had defective sight; five were invalids languishing in bed of pain; six were imbeciles and epileptics, two had moved in as the session closed and four could not be induced to learn" (*MS* 55). Baldwin describes the records that remain in Stewart's archived papers, most of which take the form of index cards that include a name, age, and designation such as "can read a little," "can read some but cannot write," or "cannot read or write" (50).

⁷⁸ Stewart managed to get this information through backdoor connections. Baldwin writes, "While visiting the nation's capital, Stewart enlisted the aid of her friend Congressman William J. Fields and Kentucky senator Ollie

own efforts to count and track illiterates, Stewart also mobilized existing networks of communal connection in her crusade: “bankers were on the alert from illiterates who made their mark on checks [...]; jailers put their prisoners to the book;⁷⁹ traveling salesmen [...] talked ‘no illiteracy’ as enthusiastically as they talked dry-goods, notions, boots and shoes” (*MS* 63). The lessons of Stewart’s textbooks come to life when every act of community engagement is potentially understood as a literacy act, not only in the small rural spaces, but also in the larger imagined communities of state and nation.⁸⁰

Conclusion

By 1930, the Census reported that illiteracy among the U.S. population over the age of 10 had dropped to 4.3%. According to Cora Wilson Stewart’s records, of the millions of Americans that had learned to read and write in the preceding decades, more than 700,000 did so thanks to her (Baldwin 188). Of course, “learning to read and write” is as ambiguous as the label “illiterate,” and through my readings in this chapter, I have shown how Stewart’s unique contributions to this discourse on literacy only add to the ambiguity by embracing it wholeheartedly. For Stewart’s students, coming of readerly age (if not calendrical age) in a moment of literacy-in-crisis, the stakes of being seen as illiterate were high and the time for

James, who together prevailed on the chief of the U.S. Census Bureau to give her the names of Kentucky illiterates, listed by county of residence, a practice that continued for the next fifteen years at no cost to the state” (52). Stewart brags about this victory in her memoir, noting that after Kentucky secured a roster of her illiterates for free, the Census Bureau “has since been flooded with demands and some states have paid thousands of dollars to have the names of their illiterates copied” (122). New York was one such state, whose department of education paid for the names of its illiterates in 1920, then distributed lists to every school district in the state (“Aim to Americanize”). By 1930, the Census Bureau had budgeted funds to cover the cost of copying these lists and planned to “furnish such lists on request”; however, the Attorney General put an end to the practice in September 1930, ruling that the congressional act that authorized the Census did not allow for such a targeted use of the data (“Law Holds”).

⁷⁹ In her memoir, Stewart includes the text of a State Prison Board resolution that establishing the ability to read and write as “one of the essential prerequisites to a parole” (*MS* 117).

⁸⁰ When the United States entered the First World War, only to discover that a quarter of its army’s draftees could not read or write, Stewart answered the call to serve by producing a special textbook for soldiers. However, she also used the more systematized instruments of the draft board to deepen her own search for illiteracy: anyone in Kentucky who had signed his draft card by mark instead of by signature was subject to Moonlight School-style remediation (*MS* 81).

learning to read was in short demand. Stewart's books provided a crash course in a particular type of literacy, one that recognized how being a reader signified across different dimensions of the student's life. In their carefully observed (if sometimes blunt) depictions of literacy's social meaning, Stewart's books put into image and text the usually-unspoken assumptions about how reading and writing are used, providing both their intended audience and later readers with valuable evidence of socializing processes that, almost by definition, we would rather leave unwritten.

In their focus on adult beginning readers, Stewart's books also provide a helpful corrective to the tendency to naturalize the literacy learning process as part of normal human development. We do not imagine a child of four or five as "illiterate"; nor would we likely say of primary reading education that its purpose is "to emancipate from illiteracy all those enslaved in its bondage," as Stewart did of her schools (*MS 9*). Rather, since the late nineteenth century—thanks in large part to the research and thinking of the educational psychologists and reading researchers discussed in Chapter 1—literacy learning in children has been assimilated into models of "normal" physiological, psychological, and social development. Today, the clock for "literacy milestones"—such as developing motor skills, attention and perception practices, and fundamental assumptions about systems of signs and symbols—starts from birth and is expected to run its course by age seven ("Literacy Milestones"). Understood in developmental terms, then, illiteracy can seem insurmountably *unnatural*: if a child does not learn to read at the proper time, it is easy to assume that his or her entire future literacy—and therefore future fitness in a social and political world—is compromised. In her own time, Stewart's work with adult readers made it clear that adults could not only learn to read, but could also be taught how to think of themselves as "readers" in strategic ways that addressed the presumed deficits accrued by a prior life of

illiteracy. In our time, Stewart's books set into relief the ways in which the reading process and learning-to-read process continue to be described in natural terms.

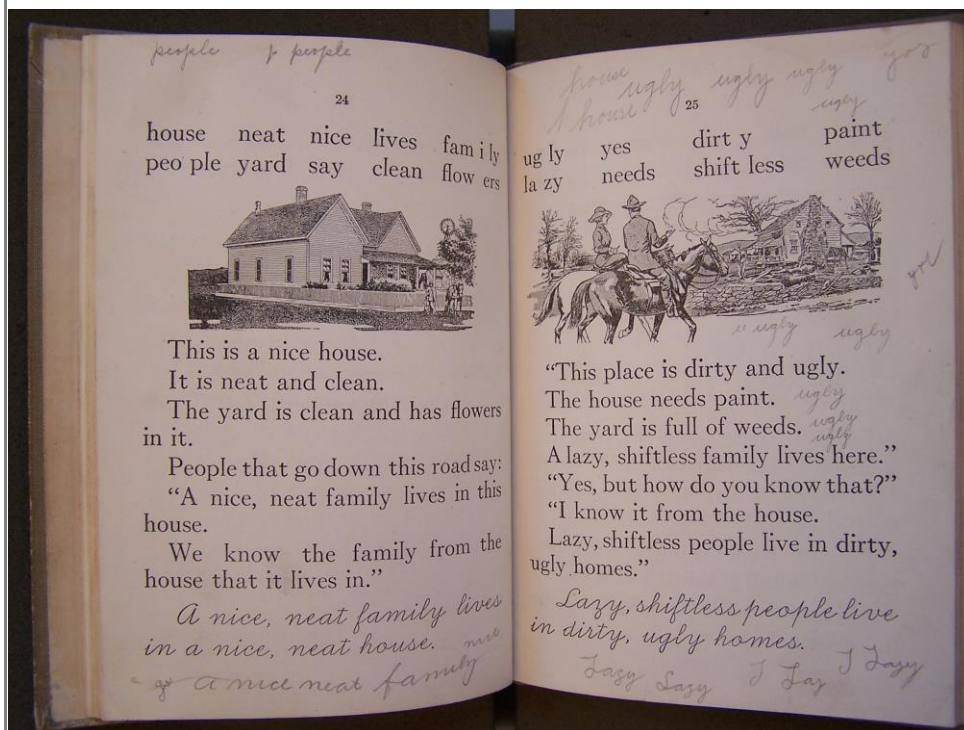
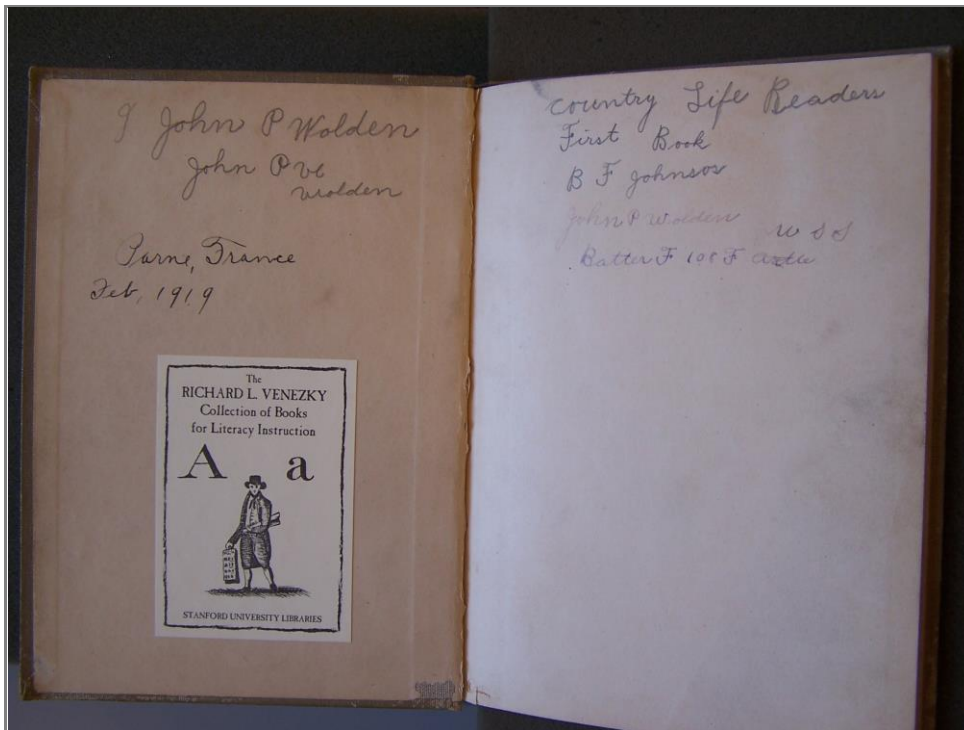
It would be easy—and not entirely unfair—to read Stewart's textbooks as we read the tests of Chapter 1, as disciplinary instruments whose form and content are designed to bring an unruly population into line with the dominant values of a print-based social order. In their play with both the shame and desire of the “illiterate reader,” her books yoke literacy's mythic goodness to the normative values of the emerging middle-class, creating in her students a desire for a world that will always be kept beyond their reach. Teaching a farmer to sign his name does nothing to address the underlying structures of inequality and vulnerability that control that farmer's material circumstances. In this way, Stewart's books seem to be yet another episode in a long line of uses of reading and writing to compel obedience and conformity at the expense of individual freedom. However, Stewart's books can also serve as potent reminders of the real hope that reading can provide to those who cannot access it. My reading of Stewart's textbooks has emphasized the ways in which Stewart figures reading and writing as powerful, if imprecise, practices of identification with a lifestyle lived according to text. Contrary to the notion of reading ability as an objective measure, and contrary to uses of reading as mere rhetorical window-dressing for political projects of exclusion, Stewart's books show her students multiple ways to claim the identity of “reader.” Moving from “illiterate” to “literate” in Stewart's books is as much about learning to sign your name as it is about improving country roads, embracing indoor plumbing, diversifying your crops, and trading in your “moonshine and bullets” for “lemonade and Bibles” (*MS 53*). In the feud-ridden backwoods of Eastern Kentucky, in the confusion of an army camp, or in the tense environment of an Indian reservation, the identity of

“reader” signals a commitment to a larger set of principles that are shared by a larger community of those who read and recognize reading in others.

Ultimately, as sources in a history of reading, Stewart’s primers not only show us that reading is always contingent and social, but they also show us specific contingencies and socialities that are not often included in records of reading. While my readings of Stewart’s texts have necessarily recovered some of these contingencies from a distance, I will end with another reader’s response to Stewart’s books, one who was arguably much closer to Stewart’s intended audience. At some point in the past, a young man named John P. Wolden came into contact with a copy of Stewart’s *Country Life Reader First Book*. Wolden’s copy, filled with extensive annotations, has been preserved as part of the Venezky Collection of Books for Literacy Instruction at Stanford University. These annotations show that Wolden has used Stewart’s books for handwriting practice: the margins are full of letters, words, and phrases, copied over and over in a penciled hand so heavy that many of the words leave imprints two or three pages deep (figs. 2.10, 2.11).⁸¹ Wolden’s iterative marks remind us that any neatness we may see in the text’s lessons is as much a product of our own ways of reading as of the lessons themselves. For example, on the page discussed above with the run-down house, Wolden has filled the blank space of the page with the words *ugly* and *dirty*. His inexpert marks disrupt the careful mechanics of the page—the mutually-reinforcing efforts of image and text—by playing outside of both. It is tempting to read Wolden’s marks as signs that Stewart’s lessons have worked: the two words he has chosen to copy—*ugly* and *lazy*—so perfectly capture the shame of illiteracy

⁸¹ Wolden has also improvised an *ex libris* and title page that provide more information as to who he might have been. Under the name and publishers of the book, he has written “batter[y?] F 108 F” and what I take as an attempt at the word “artillery.” (Also on the inside cover, but in a different, more expert hand, is a mark for “Parne, France, Feb 1919,” indicating that the book—if not Wolden himself—made it from the U.S. to France.) If the user of this book is the same John P. Wolden who was processed for the U.S. Army draft in Philadelphia on June 5, 1917 as a naturalized citizen originally from what is now Lithuania, then it appears that Wolden was learning to write and read at the same time as he was learning to become an American soldier.

that reading and writing are meant to counter that Wolden *must* have seized on them for the affective work they were intended to do. Or, perhaps more likely, Wolden just needed to practice the tricky shapes of the cursive *g* and *y*, two letters whose similar shapes might make them hard for a beginning writer. Whatever we may read into Wolden's marginalia, they are one man's practice strokes, part of an earnest effort to be recognized as a reader and writer. Wolden's performance is a compelling reminder of how important the label "literate" is, not only for those who struggle to earn it, but also for those of us who may take it for granted. As we consider how and why reading and writing have come to hold such sway over our own forms of being and meaning-making, we would do well to remember that the history of reading contains all sorts of readers, communities for whom "reading" activates different structures of feeling, different interpretive priorities, different understandings of how reading signifies in a social world. Including stories from these other readers (even non-readers) in histories of reading can only deepen our own understanding of why we are ourselves so invested in being, being seen as, and making others into readers.



Figs. 2.10 and 2.11. A copy of Stewart's *Country Life Reader First Book*, inscribed by John P. Wolden. Courtesy Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Chapter 3

“To guide the right readers to the right books”:

Newspaper Book Reviews and Typologies of Ordinary Reading

The book review page of the daily paper has long served as a meeting space in which readers, authors, publishers, and booksellers encounter each other in print. The exact nature of these encounters, however, defies any simple description, something that O.H. Cheney found when he was hired by the National Association of Book Publishers to offer an outsider’s diagnosis of the industry’s struggles.⁸² In his unsparing 1931 report, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930–1931*, Cheney is hard-pressed to describe in any detail either the economic or cultural functions of the book reviews that appeared in magazines and newspapers across the country. Despite the fact that no other industry faced the challenge of selling commodities that are “continuously and selectively criticized—and in the very media in which they are advertised,” Cheney notes, publishers have no reliable way to assess or influence this criticism (108). Do book reviews lead to increased sales, or are they too unreliable to function as advertising? Do book reviews help raise the “literary temperature” of America by winnowing out the “trash,” or are regular readers fatigued by reviews’ tepid, repetitive critiques (112-114)? Even if Cheney can answer questions about who writes, edits, and publishes book reviews, he has no way of knowing who actually *reads* them. He figures that major newspaper reviews may reach 12% of the literate adult population, but he immediately undermines the meaningfulness of this figure, recognizing that circulation, population, and literacy statistics tell very little about readership and use (111).

⁸² Cheney was a retired banker and consultant who conducted fifteen months’ worth of research for this report. For more on Cheney and his report, see Striplas 84-91.

Without a sense of who a review's readers actually are, it is impossible—from a publisher's point of view, at least—to ensure that reviews are predictable, efficient instruments of commerce and culture. Ultimately, Cheney declares the haphazard nature of book reviewing a major liability for an industry looking to streamline and maximize its impact with consumers. Nevertheless, he also cautiously declares, “It may be far greater potentially than actually, but the power of criticism is very real in the selection of books and therefore in the book industry” (108).

Cheney's bleak assessment of the book review fits with the overall vision and tone of his notoriously cranky report, but the issues that he raises about book criticism and journalism are by no means unique to his time and place. As a reference genre that came of age alongside the print explosion of early modern Europe,⁸³ the book review has consistently been recognized as a key means of coordinating the many different constituencies with an investment in books and reading—and yet, describing how this coordination occurs has always been a challenge. In his history of two of the earliest and most famous English periodical reviews, the *Monthly* (started in 1749) and the *Critical* (started in 1756), Frank Donoghue shows how editors of literary reviews struggled with the form's potential to pursue dichotomous purposes. Reviews that ostensibly began as “a means of discerning order in what was perceived to be an overwhelming proliferation of printed matter” also exercised a significant standardizing—even disciplinary—effect on what he calls “the reading trade” (17). However, as much as early book reviews “attempted to police the relations between the new variety of readers, the books they were buying, and the authors of those books” (10), they also inevitably catered to the same readers they hoped to police: as a “salable commodity” itself, the book review was only as culturally valuable as its market share (41). Scott Ellis offers a similar account of early American book

⁸³ See Ann Blair 166-168.

reviewing. Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of a "literary field," Ellis argues, "In the negotiated terrain of literature, the periodical book review came to play a central role of authority, one eagerly sought by those who wanted to present their ideas and exert their authority to a large reading population" (160). Of course, the large reading population also exerted some authority back onto the book review, making this relationship unevenly reciprocal.⁸⁴

Contemporary observers and subsequent historians alike have attempted to position book reviews along the axes of organizing or critiquing authors' and publishers' latest outputs, and policing or assisting readers' choices and tastes. Most of the time, book reviews land in a murky, middle space where they organize, critique, guide, and police with varying enthusiasm and effectiveness. Nevertheless, whether a review's stance toward its readers took the form of an elitist concern for the aesthetic and moral standards of the reader, a market-minded obligation to keep the reader entertained by and devoted to the review, or an objective-minded interest in providing organization to the expanding realm of print, the book review was and remains an undoubtedly reader-oriented form.

As a ubiquitous and varied form of commentary on literary culture, in an always-anxious relationship with its imagined community of readers, the book review seems especially situated to capture and transmit a period's attitudes toward readers and reading. This premise seems especially true of the early-twentieth-century United States, when book reviews proliferated with the growth of the general- and special-interest periodical press.⁸⁵ An ever-increasing number of

⁸⁴ As Bourdieu explains, "[C]ritics cannot exercise 'influence' on their readers unless the readers grant them that power because they are structurally attuned in their vision of the social world, their tastes and their whole habitus" (165).

⁸⁵ One quick (though hardly complete) measurement of the proliferation of book reviews is the growth of the *Book Review Digest*. Compiled annually starting in 1903, the *Digest* summarized the reception of every new book under review for a given year, and the growing list of review publications consulted over the first few decades of the century offers a small sense of how reviewing proliferated during this time. The 1905 volume draws from 45 different reviewing journals, representing a mix of genteel magazines and professional journals, mostly American, though with some London titles such as the *Academy*, *Athenaeum*, and *Times Literary Supplement* included as well

magazines, whether dedicated wholly to reviewing or more general in their interests, kept alive “the genteel tradition of criticism,” which Amy Blair glosses as “celebrat[ing] fineness of sentiment, the mind and originality of the author, and the transformative qualities of the text” (39). Gordon Hutner, who turns to a wide range of book reviews in *What America Read*, lists the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Bookman*, *Dial*, *Nation*, *Vanity Fair*, and *New Yorker* as “among the most admired vehicles for shaping literary opinion during the decade [of the 1920s]” (52). Additionally, more “middlebrow” magazines with significantly wider audiences also began incorporating book coverage into their pages. The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, for example, the circulation leader among monthly magazines from 1903 through the end of World War I, introduced a “Books and Bookmakers” column in 1889; that initial effort paved the way for Hamilton Wright Mabie’s influential books advice column in the same magazine, which ran from 1902 to 1912 (Amy Blair 25-28).

In newspapers of this same period, the improved technology and increased advertising revenue that allowed papers to grow in size and scope in the late nineteenth century meant that a paper’s literary news, reviews, and advertising could appear as a separate page or even a separate section. The *New York Times* first published its *Book Review* as a tabloid-sized supplement to the Saturday paper in 1896; the *Book Review* moved to Sunday in 1911. The *New York Evening Post* followed in 1920 with a literary supplement of its own, the *Literary Review*, which would go on to become Henry Seidel Canby’s *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1924. In that same year, the *New York Herald Tribune* introduced its own Sunday supplement, *Books* (Rubin 42). In addition to appearing more like magazines than newspapers, these supplementary sections also aspired to the cultural cache more readily associated with magazine reviews, but plenty of newspapers

(the *New York Times* is the only U.S. daily paper included in the list). In 1929, this list had expanded to 63, with the bulk of the increase made in professional journals and newspapers.

continued to treat books as news on weekly books pages and even in daily bulletins. Aimed at different audiences, driven by different editorial priorities, aspiring to different critical and cultural roles, the wide variety of book reviewing in specialized and mass media produced different ways for readers to collect and process information about literary culture.

This chapter considers what book reviews—specifically, those found in newspapers—can tell us about reading in the early twentieth century United States. The little scholarly attention that has been paid to book reviews has tended to focus on magazine reviews,⁸⁶ which reached far fewer readers and from a far more limited segment of society. By contrast, newspaper book reviews, especially those in papers that did not self-consciously separate their books coverage into supplemental, magazine-style sections, can be especially helpful for understanding how ideas about reading were packaged and disseminated to a wider and more diverse audience. In essence, I am attempting what Cheney tried and failed to do in 1931, but with a key difference: while Cheney wanted to know how book reviews could serve the publishers and booksellers who funded his study, I am interested in the ways that book reviews served readers. Unlike the unknowable commercial benefits that Cheney hoped to identify and maximize, the readerly benefits of book reviews are encoded in the forms, contents, and interpretive priorities of the reviews themselves. In the following reading of the newspaper book review as a genre of cultural instruction, I argue that book reviews did more than record or reflect the literary field in this moment. Newspaper book reviews produced and circulated an idiom of literary participation for the ordinary reader—whomever or wherever she was relative to centers of literary capital.

⁸⁶ See Amy Blair's work on Mabie and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Rubin's chapter on the magazine *Books* in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* is interested in newspaper reviews insofar as they self-consciously style themselves to look like magazines and attain a magazine's cultural cache.

The first section of this chapter identifies the forms that come to define the newspaper book review in the early twentieth century. Emerging out of material distinctions between newspapers and magazines on the one hand, and out of ideological distinctions among journalism, criticism, and literature on the other, newspaper book reviews tended to embrace more “journalistic” forms of reporting as reviewers and editors recognized the newspaper’s lower status among print culture hierarchies of the day. From this lower position, however, book reviews could perform the critical function of surveying the literary field and helping their readers understand their own place within these hierarchies. By reading book reviews with an eye toward how they portray readers and acts of reading (rather than solely how they talk about authors, publishers, and books), we can see how reviews embrace what I am calling a typological understanding of reading and readers: reviews delineate types of readers and reading practices, then align these types with specific interests, habits, and identities that readers might bring to the book review. Book reviews thus teach readers to imagine themselves *as readers*, a process that includes considering other aspects of their identities besides simply what types of books they like to read.

The second half of the chapter pursues these themes through a case study of one prolific newspaper book reviewer, Fanny Butcher (1888-1987) of the *Chicago Tribune*. Butcher makes for an ideal case study: not only was she active for nearly fifty years, but her personal and professional histories also helpfully encapsulate many of the tensions inherent in the form of the newspaper book review itself. As a woman working in journalism who leveraged her femininity into a particular critical style of reporting about and reading books; as a literary outsider with strong allegiances to the Midwest who nonetheless cultivated relationships with East Coast literati; as a lifelong newspaperwoman who, despite her ambitions to write a novel, never crossed

over into higher forms of print, Butcher was herself a type of reader who was painfully aware of where she stood within—and how she might upset the balance of—literary cultural hierarchies. Through two sustained readings of her work and self-reflections on book reviewing, I will trace the ways in which she negotiates tensions between ordinariness and literariness in the service of her personal and professional reputation, all in full view of her readers. As examples of the genre of the newspaper book review, Butcher's columns are not always extraordinary: she reports on the same mix of newly published fiction and non-fiction books as most other similar reviewers at similar papers writing during the same time. Nevertheless, Butcher's columns are telling for the ways in which she figures "the ordinary reader" as a subject position of expansive possibility, the site at which all the nodes of the communications circuit converge, as readerly interests make or break authors, support or upend markets, and give meaning to the very idea of "the literary." Whether she is reporting the latest literary gossip or assessing a work of "literature," Butcher models a repertoire of textual and extratextual practices that celebrate her identity as both an observer of and a participant in literary culture. In the end, all of Butcher's layered performances as a reader, a critic, and even a literary celebrity are mediated through her institutional role as book reviewer and Literary Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Teasing out Butcher's strategic use of the newspaper book review's particular generic forms and expectations helps animate the claims outlined in the first part of this chapter.

Negotiating "Bookishness"

The newspaper book review in the early twentieth century was a site of variability and experimentation, as editors and publishers constantly expanded, contracted, repositioned, and reframed the spaces allotted to literary news within their papers. Given how varied books coverage was in papers across the country—and even within the pages of a single paper—it can

be somewhat difficult to talk about “the newspaper book review” in this period as a stable, unified genre. As a case in point, consider the different ways in which book reviews were packaged and presented in the pages of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.⁸⁷ In the early 1870s, before Joseph Pulitzer purchased the *Dispatch* and combined it with the *Post*, the “New Books” section appeared in the same cramped columns as commercial and real estate news. “New Books” usually appeared as a list of books received during the week along with brief summaries or reviews of a select number of those books. Through the 1870s and 1880s, a feature called “Our Books Column” appeared next to the “Home” column; this affinity between book and housekeeping features continued into the early 1900s, when book news was bundled in the paper’s “Home Readers’ Magazine” section (sometimes called the “Illustrated Magazine for Home Readers”). This “Magazine,” which, despite its name, appeared in the contiguous pages of the paper, looked like a typical “women’s page” of the time: book reviews shared the space with serialized fiction, display ads for clothes and patent medicines, and comic strips.⁸⁸ Through the 1910s, book reviews appeared next to the dense text of classified ads and real estate listings, amid announcements for “amusements” and entertainment, and even alongside obituaries. Only in the 1920s did book news and reviews receive their own designated page, “News of New Books and Those Who Write Them,” a full-page layout presented under a banner of critical authority: “Conducted by Dr. Otto Heller, Professor of Modern European Literature in Washington University.” This latest instantiation of the “newspaper book review”—as separate

⁸⁷ St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the United States by population in 1900 and 1910 (it dropped to sixth in 1920), and the *Post-Dispatch* was one of the city’s two largest daily papers (the other was the *Globe-Democrat*). During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the *Post-Dispatch*’s circulation grew from 88,000 copies daily (111,000 Sunday) in 1899 to 241,000 copies daily (329,000 Sunday) in 1930. By circulation, the *Post-Dispatch* was consistently one of the country’s ten largest daily papers published outside of New York (see N.W. Ayers and Son’s guides for circulation figures).

⁸⁸ The “Once-A-Week Book Club,” a short-lived feature discussed below, appeared in the Magazine from 1905-1908.

and distinguished from the other business of the paper—may be the most recognizable as a book review to a modern audience. However, through much of this period, in the *Post-Dispatch*, and indeed, in most large daily papers, book news and reviews appeared in much more varied and contingent spaces in a medium that was itself undergoing rapid expansion and change.

Despite the variability of where books coverage appeared within newspapers, the internal generic conventions of newspaper book reviews appear relatively stable through this time period. Above all, newspaper books coverage treated books and authors as *news*, an editorial decision that manifested in the common, shared forms that book reviews took in the pages of newspapers. Under headlines such as “Fresh Literary Notes” (*Chicago Tribune*, 1900), “Some New Books and Literary News” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1910), and “Fresh Literature” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1910), most newspaper book reviews relied on short blurbs and lists that reported on the latest books and authors making literary news. These reviews frequently appeared without an attribution to a specific reporter, and the erasure of the human hand behind the news gave the reviews an atmospheric quality that served as a mark of facticity. Other formal innovations, such as the inclusion of best-seller or “books received” lists, further emphasized the newspaper’s ability to capture a seemingly objective snapshot of the current literary moment.⁸⁹ The interest in “freshness” exemplified by such lists was often accompanied by an interest in the local, as best-seller lists from local book stores or lists of the most popular books checked out from local public libraries made news out of the habits and tastes of a newspaper’s own readers. Taken as a whole, these formal features and content preferences gave newspaper books coverage an

⁸⁹ The first best-seller lists in American print media appeared in the *Bookman* magazine in 1895; *Publisher’s Weekly* began compiling its well-known list in 1912. The *New York Times* did not begin printing its now-famous list until October 1931 (Miller 289). In the years between 1895 and 1931, plenty of newspapers ran their own locally-inflected lists, drawing data from booksellers in their areas. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* printed a best-seller list with its book news as early as 1915.

overriding sense of “newsiness”—a quality we can read in the deliberate emphasis to treat books, authors, and readers as newsmakers—that emerges as one of the defining characteristics of the newspaper book review’s particular brand of literary discourse.

The varying configurations and stabilizing formal features of turn-of-the-century book reviews might be read as reflections of and responses to larger changes taking place in the world of American newspapers during this era. As media scholars have long noted, the period from the 1830s to the turn of the twentieth century was one of radical transformation for American print journalism.⁹⁰ Technological developments in print and communications (such as wood-pulp paper-making, linotype, cylinder printing, and the telephone) meant that more newspapers could be produced and distributed more efficiently (Mott 495-503). An influx of capital in the form of advertising dollars made newspapers even cheaper and more abundant. As the number and variety of daily, evening, and weekly papers increased, so, too, did the number and variety of newspaper readers.⁹¹ The content of newspapers likewise expanded to meet the needs of this varied readership, and book news and reviews were among the specialized features that editors included in the hopes of appealing to an increasingly diversifying audience. In the *Post-Dispatch* history sketched above, the continual grouping of book news with features aimed especially at women readers is one example of how books coverage was increasingly thought of as a part of this more specialized content. Furthermore, while technological and material changes certainly affected how and why book news and reviews were integrated into newspapers, these more

⁹⁰ Frank Luther Mott’s *American Journalism: 1690–1960* (1941/1950/1962) provides the broad strokes of this established historical narrative, as it offers a survey of the major figures and technological developments in newspaper history from 1690 to Mott’s own day. For successors to Mott, see Schudson, Mindich, and Smythe.

⁹¹ Richard L. Kaplan cites sociological studies of readers conducted in the 1920s to show that newspaper reading was, in fact, more common than book and magazine reading among those of lower educational levels (123). Whether or not newspaper reading was “near-universal” as Kaplan contests, it was at the very least increasingly perceived as a baseline for functional literacy. We saw in Chapter 1 how educators and test developers considered the daily paper a de facto threshold of adequate literacy for American adults. Such an assumption would not have been possible without wide-scale changes to the nineteenth century newspaper’s size, content, and price.

visible changes were accompanied and often abetted by equally dramatic changes to the ideological underpinnings of American journalism. From the 1830s onward, newspapers became increasingly independent of political party control, and new, nonpartisan papers espoused the modern-seeming journalistic ideals of detachment, balance, and, above all, objectivity (Mindich 11-12).⁹² The “just the facts” attitude associated with *fin-de-siècle* journalism affected every page in the newspaper, and books coverage was by no means exempt from journalistic treatment in the form of lists, excerpts, and reports.

Considering the newspaper book review as a part of this developing ecosystem of print journalism leads to an inevitable comparison with the other major print platform for literary news and commentary, the magazine. For many contemporary and modern observers, the journalistic ethos of newspaper-based books coverage distinguished it from the “critical” conversations about books and authors that were printed in the pages of monthly or quarterly magazines. Joan Shelley Rubin sketches the nineteenth century history of this “news” versus “criticism” divide (36-38), a structuring (though dubious) difference between types of book reviews that was still in place when Cheney wrote in 1931, “The distinction between criticism and book-reviewing is obvious—until the two are actually compared” (110).⁹³ In fact, in Cheney’s view, the difference between reviews in various types of print media is “hardly noticeable” (110), but a clear

⁹² Michael Schudson’s *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978) provides the canonical account of the shifting value placed on objectivity in American journalistic history. Mindich pushes the start date on objectivity further back into antebellum America and identifies different non-journalistic influences on the idea, such as War Department reports from the Civil War and medical discourses on empirical observation. Mindich also offers a necessary corrective to the too-easy assumption that an independent press, one founded on ideals of detachment, balance, and objectivity, was necessarily a more democratic press. His most persuasive example is of the *New York Times*’ coverage of Ida B. Well’s anti-lynching crusade in the 1880s. In the interest of balanced coverage, the *Times* ended up dignifying and disseminating racist arguments in favor of lynching.

⁹³ The debate over the relative merit of these two main strains of book reviewing raged in the pages of nineteenth century magazines and newspapers, and, as Rubin notes, “the jeremiad concerning American book reviewing” was a well-established genre by the time Cheney composed his (34). And of course, the genre lives well beyond Cheney. Rubin, in fact, opens her chapter on book reviewing in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* with a similar jeremiad from the early 1960s.

hierarchy nonetheless exists among different publication types, with “media which are very definitely bookish” at the top, down through monthly, weekly, and finally newspaper reviews (111). Thus, within the terms of these debates between criticism and news, this division did not result in equal parts, as “criticism” (especially the sort modified by the crucial adjective “literary”) was always perceived as a higher form of discourse than “news.”⁹⁴ Some newspaper book reviews contain a sense of this hierarchy within their own columns. For example, many of the “Fresh Literary Notes” mentioned above are taken second-hand from magazines. Stories, essays, and critical debates from the *Critic*, *Harper’s Magazine*, the *Contemporary Review*, and *Collier’s Weekly* are summarized and reported as “fresh literary notes” in the *Chicago Tribune*. The implied hierarchy is clear: higher-minded magazine debates provide fodder for more objective newspaper reports, which must condense and summarize rarefied magazine material for a newspaper’s more varied and less sophisticated readers.

However, before we draw too thick a line between newspaper “journalism” and magazine “criticism,” it is worth considering how this distinction has always existed more in perception than in empirical reality. While most newspaper books coverage took the form of short reports, and while most magazine books coverage took the form of longer, signed, single-topic essays, there was plenty of formal crossover in both. Newspapers, especially those in large cities, increasingly had dedicated literary editors who produced more “critical” takes on new books. The stand-alone, magazine-style *New York Times Book Review* is the ultimate example of this type of mimicry, but even in the *Post-Dispatch*’s professorially-curated books page, we can see how a newspaper might attempt to claim the higher cultural ground traditionally held by

⁹⁴ Part of the perceived superiority of criticism over journalism stemmed from the latter’s close association with advertising. Rubin shows how advertising’s impact within the newspaper industry influenced the type of reviewing that could be contained within a paper’s pages. Afraid of alienating publishers, editors often kept newspaper critics on a short leash (41).

“criticism.” Conversely, literary magazines were full of newsy tidbits, the type of “book chat” that treated books and authors as newsmakers and even celebrities (Ohmann 107). In the early days of *The Bookman*, for example, a monthly journal which Gordon Hutner characterizes as “that bastion of moderate taste” (71), the first section of each edition was given over to such literary gossip, an *amuse-bouche* to the journal’s main course of longer features and reviews. Nevertheless, while newspaper and magazine book reviews used many of the same textual forms, the reputations obtaining to these two different print media forms of literary discourse were quite distinct, starting in the nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth. Book reviews themselves helped to produce and circulate the terms of this distinction.

If “journalism” and “criticism” provide one set of terms for labeling an inherent tension in book reviewing, then “journalism” and “literature” present another set of terms for a different, though related, tension. The rise of professional journalism and the concomitant rise of objectivity as a journalistic value had special implications for journalists who worked with literary news. As Kathy Roberts Forde and Katherine A. Foss have argued, the emergence of professional “journalism” in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries affected contemporary definitions of “literature”: once considered “twin professions,” journalism and literature were increasingly thought of as distinct by writers, editors, printers, and publishers of this period (136). In print culture trade journals from the 1880s and 1890s, print industry practitioners increasingly talked about literature and journalism as two poles of a high/low spectrum. As journalists championed objectivity over more “literary” modes of expression, journalistic genres, especially the news report, accrued a sense of “lowbrow” capital when compared to their literary

counterparts (138). Book reviews, particularly the newsy types that appeared in the pages of the daily newspaper, were one space in which journalism and literature continued to intermingle.⁹⁵

Investigating the cultural work of the newspaper book review as a dispersed, material institution in the early twentieth century thus requires attention not only to details of form, but also to the perceived hierarchical spectra within which these forms circulated and were consumed. The literary field of the period was one of oppositions and distinctions: between journalism and criticism, journalism and literature, newspapers and magazines, and periodicals and books, among others. Cheney's notion of a spectrum of "bookishness"—ranging from critical magazines down to the newspaper—helps tie these varied considerations together so that we might define the book review in terms of how it helped readers understand their proximity to and distance from the "bookish" world of literary culture. Whether they appeared in magazines, journals, or newspapers, and whether they employed essays, feature stories, best-seller lists, displays ads, or reports, book reviews were uniquely positioned to negotiate and lend structure to their readers' relationships to both "high" and "low" cultural forms. In newspaper book reviews in particular—working from the bottom of the print culture hierarchy in both a material and ideological sense—these negotiations shaped the literary experiences of a large and diverse community of readers. And, as we will see below, this obligation to helping readers in turn gave the newspaper book review its distinctive, if highly variable and contingent, forms.

"A public for every kind of book"

Contemporary understandings of book reviewing acknowledged the central role that readers played as guarantors of a review's effectiveness. Even Cheney, an outside observer,

⁹⁵ Of course, book reviews were not the only site of such intermingling, as "literature" in the form of serialized novels, short stories, and poems continued to appear in the pages of newspapers well into the twentieth century. See Johanningsmeier for a discussion of how the persistence of literary syndicates upset those cultural arbiters interested in maintaining a distinction between "high" and "low" forms.

could note axiomatically in his report, “The practical function of criticism is to guide the right readers to the right books” (111). Fanny Butcher, the long-time Literary Editor of the *Chicago Tribune* (discussed more below), makes this same point in even sharper terms: “If a review isn’t read, it defeats its own main purpose” (*Many Lives* 356). A self-promotional text published by the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Pictured Encyclopedia of the World’s Greatest Newspaper* (1928), elaborates on the idea that book reviews exist to serve the needs of their readers. The anonymously-authored entry for “Book Review” in the *Encyclopedia* figures the “literary field” as a wilderness and the reviewer as an especially skilled “scout”:

The book reviewer is his [the reader’s] scout, pointing out what is worth while, letting him know which books serve what type of interest, and thus making it possible for him to read that portion of the output which will interest him. And the book lover follows this scout or that, according to the success of the scouts in recommending books that he likes. (64)

The scout metaphor is particularly appealing in the way that it combines the spirit of Butcher’s remarks about how reviews should serve their readers with a navigational metaphor that resonates with Cheney’s claims about reviews as a form of guidance. In this particular type of wilderness—one marked not so much by disorder but rather by a proliferation of rule-based hierarchies that often overlap or contradict each other—the reviewer-as-scout can help illuminate the more useful of these distinctions according to the reader’s own tastes and interests. But the scout metaphor also fails in an important respect: the singularity of the figure of both the scout and the reader. Cheney’s description, with its plural “readers” and “books,” is a much more accurate reflection of the actual dynamics of the mass-mediated newspaper book review. While the idealized scout only needs to blaze one path at a time, the newspaper book reviewer must answer to an undifferentiated mass audience that includes readers of many tastes and interests. Thus the scout metaphor, rather than being idealized or insufficient, actually raises a crucial

question about the conception of the book review as a service to readers: how does the book reviewer provide attentive, individualized guidance for thousands of readers at once through a wilderness characterized by numerous flexible “bookish” forms and tastes?

Rather than consider this problem in abstract terms, we can turn to newspaper book reviews themselves to see how the authors and editors of reviews dealt with the issue of audience. Newspaper book reviews in this period are marked by a heightened interest in genre and types—not only genres of books, but also types of readers. Fanny Butcher, for example, routinely addresses her reviews to specific types of readers based on a narrow sense of their interests, attitudes, and habits. One Butcher review mentions “Oscar Wilde-ites,” showing how author preference defines a subset of readers (“Tabloid” 10/24/15).⁹⁶ Other columns address “the passionate collector,” or “the eager aspirant to grand opera” (“Books”), readers defined more by subject interests or aspirations. The underlying assumption in both cases is that readers can be easily grouped into types, and that the book reviewer’s specific skill comes in mapping out the affinities between particular types of books and particular types of readers.

The division of readers according to the types of books they might like to read is not by any means a unique understanding of how individuals interact with the literary marketplace. In the previous chapter of this dissertation, we saw how Cora Wilson Stewart constructed her reading primers for readers who were entirely defined by their occupation or vocation, in addition to how they might eventually use print literacy to present themselves to the wider world. In the next chapter, we will see how soldiers are understood as a unique population of readers with specific habits, interests, and attitudes toward reading. For a more cynical example, we can turn again to O.H. Cheney, who offered this optimistic maxim for a struggling publishing

⁹⁶ All future references to Butcher’s “Tabloid Book Review” columns will be cited “TBR” with the date of publication.

industry: “Because there are a number of publics, there is a public for every kind of book” (82). Library historians working from late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century borrowing and accession records have demonstrated how the collections of local libraries in the period reflect this wisdom. Librarians and patrons increasingly built and used collections according to their local needs and interests rather than according to abstract standards of taste or quality.⁹⁷ In the commercial sphere, we can look to Janice A. Radway’s description of the curatorial workings of the Book of the Month Club (founded in 1926), in which the club’s expert judges did not necessarily base their selections upon rigid standards of taste, but rather aimed “to match readers with the books appropriate to them” (*A Feeling* 271). In other words, the reader’s needs and interests comprised important criteria for book selection. The implementation of the “negative option,” the euphemism used to describe a club member’s ability to reject a specific book club selection, reinforced this understanding, allowing readers to exercise choice in an otherwise automated system (*A Feeling* 196-7). Within this system of expert recommendation and reader selection, literary expertise did not necessarily trump or dictate individual readers’ tastes, but instead worked alongside of them. In this case, as in most cases where it was impractical to consider readers individually, genre- or interest-based divisions help manage the habits and expectations of large groups of readers.

In the varied world of newspaper book reviews, different editors and reviewers deployed the practice of addressing readers as types to a variety of effects. Most used types to provide models for their readers in the sense of the metaphorical scout: pointing out pathways for engaging with texts in ways that resonate with other elements of a reader’s identity. In fact, the correspondences that newspaper book reviews helped readers draw between their reading habits

⁹⁷ For specific examples of how this played out in local libraries, see the essays in Pawley and Robbins.

and other elements of their identities is one of the central means by which this genre helped readers make sense of their participation in the literary field—and in turn defined the newspaper book review as a particular form of cultural instruction in and of itself. The “Once-a-Week Book Club” of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* took this typological understanding of readers and books to an extreme degree. Published between 1905 and 1908 in the paper’s “Illustrated Magazine for Home Readers” and patterned after the conversation of a book club meeting, each weekly column offered a review of one book through the reactions of a cast of highly typified characters. Each “member” of the book club was identified by occupation, interest, or station in life: the Artist, the High School Teacher, the Girl, the Old Playgoer, the Literary Grain Broker, the Kindergarten Director, and the former Congressman all met in the imaginary space of the column to discuss a common text. Within their transcribed conversations, each club member played to type to a remarkable degree. In an August 1905 discussion of F. Berkeley Smith’s *Parisians Out of Doors*, for example, the Artist questions the merits of the book’s illustrations, the Old Playgoer compares the book’s portrayal of Parisians to those common to the stage, and the High School Teacher mentions her study-abroad in Paris.⁹⁸ Nearly every column sees the Girl comment on the believability of a novel’s love story, while the former Congressman is always concerned with how a story renders real-world political situations. As a fascinating space of mixed-gender, mixed-aged readers meant to capture the diversity and specificity⁹⁹ of the *Post-Dispatch*’s readers, the “Once-a-Week Book Club” is at times comical, at times cynical, but also eminently practical. Through the typified voices of its diverse cast of characters, this general-

⁹⁸ This particular column also contains an excellent example of a book review defining its readers in terms of their locality. After discussing a book all about Paris, the column closes with the Girl proclaiming that “it must just be lovely to see” Paris and its people. The Old Playgoer gets the last line, however, reminding the Girl that “your own St. Louis is good enough for you.”

⁹⁹ The character of the “Literary Grain Broker” gives the column an unmistakably Midwestern flavor.

audience column can touch on many different aspects of a single book—its aesthetics, its romantic appeal, its political importance, its author’s local reputation—all without the pressure of filtering everything through a single critical narrative. In fact, the “Once-a-Week Book Club” often ends on a note of unresolved tension, as the various personae cannot agree on a single assessment of the book under review. But while the column’s discussion format may leave the book in pieces by the end, the readers emerge as singular, cohesive personalities with a set repertoire of interpretive moves. As a book review spoken from many points of view, the “Once-a-Week Book Club” models how readers bring external elements of their identities to bear on a variety of different types of texts and renders this process in print for the purpose of guiding other readers.

In newspapers with a clearer sense of audience, this typological approach to book reviewing stands out even more. The *Chicago Defender*’s book reviews provide an instructive counterpoint to the “Once-a-Week Book Club”: rather than showing how many different types of readers make sense of a single book, the *Defender* presents a broad account of literary news for a single-issue reader. As one of the country’s leading African-American weeklies, the *Defender* refracted print culture through a distinctly racial lens, focusing always on the racial content of books and magazines and the racial identities of authors and readers.¹⁰⁰ Of its regular book review column, the paper’s editors declared in 1915, “All the books that have been recently published by men of the race and magazines containing articles on the race question are given attention by our own book reviewers” (“Defender Leads”). Indeed, the *Defender*’s attention to

¹⁰⁰ Founded in 1905 by Robert S. Abbott, the *Chicago Defender* quickly rose to prominence both within and outside of Chicago. Part of the paper’s circulation success owed to Chicago’s status as a rail hub: workers on trains would bring copies of the paper south, then bring news from the South back with them up to Chicago (Walker 24). For more on the paper’s role in Progressive Era politics in Chicago, see Stovall; for the paper’s role in promoting the Great Migration, see Walker.

books by authors of color and explicitly about racial issues distinguished it from white newspapers. Early columns, published under the headline “Books and Those Who Write Them: A Review—Our Literary ‘Round Table,’” as well as later columns, published under the headline “The Bookshelf,”¹⁰¹ highlighted non-fiction (sociological, political, or religious) and fiction texts that explicitly dealt with race issues. Many of these books, tracts, and articles received no mention at all in white newspapers.¹⁰² As with most newspaper book reviews at the time, however, the *Defender*’s “Literary Round Table” also curated news that may only be considered literary-adjacent in order to further inform its readers about the central theme of race. A column by D.W. Johnson from 17 February 1912, for example, reviews the latest issue of *The Crisis* in order to highlight an article about the governor of South Carolina’s “infamous hatred” of racial equality. The next week’s column does not review any text at all, but rather updates readers on the latest political developments in Liberia. (The ostensible “literary” occasion for this column, mentioned only at the very end, is the reprinting of Liberian President Daniel Edward Howard’s inaugural address in the *New York Age*). In these and similar instances, the *Defender*’s literary coverage—even when it is only tangentially related to books—provides a means of further modeling for its readers an active engagement with domestic and international issues of race. Readers of the *Defender*’s book review are thus offered a tailored path through the literary field,

¹⁰¹ The “Bookshelf” column, which first ran in 1922, was written by various authors through the 1920s, including A.L. Jackson, Dewey Roscoe Jones, and Mary White Ovington. Ovington’s reviews are particularly interesting because she follows the Bookshelf’s general practice of discussing books first and foremost in terms of their relevance to “the Race,” despite being herself a white woman. This leads, at times, to awkward moments of cross-racial communication, such as when Ovington comments on how “white readers” might react to a book of humorous stories by William Pickens, a caveat that does not apply to her majority black readership; or (more obviously), when Ovington uses the phrase “our Race” to describe African Americans (Ovington “The Bookshelf”).

¹⁰² A telling exception to this trend—Fanny Butcher’s review of Jessie Fauset’s *There Is Confusion* (1924)—will be discussed below.

one that flags popular texts and authors as other reviews might do,¹⁰³ but that also adds specific information for the paper's predominantly black readership.

The *Defender's* "Bookshelf" column also offers a prime example of how newspaper book reviews could extend the typological understanding of readers to describe their own reading audience.¹⁰⁴ In a notice that frequently appeared below "The Bookshelf" headline, the paper's literary editor hailed the column's readers as a unique community of "book lovers" engaged in social, participatory reading practices:

The Bookshelf is for the benefit of those of our readers who are interested in things literary. If you are a book lover and like the idea of a literary club that meets through the Bookshelf column, you are welcome. You are urged to write in to this department any comments on current or past literature that you have in mind. If you see questions in this column you care to answer, by all means do. If you have questions to ask pertaining to prose, poetry or fiction in modern or ancient literature, send them in. Address communications to Editor of Bookshelf, Chicago Defender. (Jackson, "The Bookshelf")

As members of a virtual "literary club" that meets in the textual space of the paper, readers of "The Bookshelf" are empowered by this notice to imagine themselves as a distinct—and distinctly privileged—group. The emphasis on written communication (not just reading) further invites this group of readers to imagine themselves as particularly proactive. "The Bookshelf" not only dispenses reviews and recommendations, but also provides a space for readers to write back with their own comments, answers, and questions. Readers of "The Bookshelf" are thus elevated to the status of virtual coauthors, and the practice of reading "The Bookshelf" becomes a mark of distinction.

¹⁰³ For example, a March 25, 1922, "The Bookshelf" column by the paper's book reviewer A.L. Jackson describes Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Fall of the House of Coombe*, D.H. Lawrence's *The Lost Girl*, and Louis Hemon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, all without mentioning race.

¹⁰⁴ Fanny Butcher does something similar when she refers the regular readers of her "Tabloid Book Review" column as "Tabloidites" ("TBR" 12/19/20).

The *Defender*'s explicit encouragements to its readers to think of themselves as a distinct, active group take on clear political stakes when we consider how the paper's books coverage was itself situated within a larger literary field. The same logic that asked readers to imagine "The Bookshelf" as a club-like medium of intellectual exchange also enabled "Bookshelf" editors to speak on behalf of readers in important ways, especially on issues of racial prejudice. In an August 9, 1924, column, "Bookshelf" editor A.L. Jackson does just that. Under the subheading "Pleasing White Folks"—a facetious jab at the patronizing expectation that black authors should only write with white audiences in mind—Jackson responds to a recent *Chicago Tribune* review of Jessie Fauset's novel, *There is Confusion*, in which the *Tribune*'s reviewer, Fanny Butcher, declares Fauset's book a "good first novel," but not a "great race novel." Using the first-person plural to speak for himself and his readers, Jackson laments the state of affairs in literary publishing by which any novel by an author of color is automatically labeled a "race novel." Imagining a future "when we can have a dozen or two 'just average good first novels' from the pens of our own writers giving us authentic word pictures of the lives and thoughts of our own," Jackson highlights the "diffidence and prejudices of publishers" as well as of reviewers like Butcher.¹⁰⁵ His forceful rebuttal to Butcher's review is thus more concerned with mapping the standing of authors and readers of color than with assessing the quality of Fauset's book *per se*. Of course, Jackson also maps a much smaller literary ecology: that of the city of Chicago, where Jackson speaks back to the *Tribune*'s white reviewer on behalf of his black readers. The entire exchange demonstrates succinctly how the *Defender*'s specific sense of audience inflects the

¹⁰⁵ In a lengthy and forceful second paragraph, Jackson groups Butcher with "that well intentioned group of white people who think that for some peculiar reason when a Colored man or woman attempts to do something normal [...] that he is out of his proper milieu." Jackson is quite right to take issue with Butcher's disappointment in the ordinariness of Fauset's book. As we will discuss below, one of Butcher's favorite ways to praise white authors is to highlight the "humanity" of their work and their closeness to real life (Jackson, "The Onlooker").

paper's books coverage along specific lines of race and geography in addition to more generic lines of cultural distinction.

Both the "Once-a-Week Book Club" and the *Defender's* book review columns show how a typological understanding of both readers and texts allows for book reviews to organize literary information for a variety of different types of readers. Book reviews have long been understood as a means of categorizing and sorting texts, but the examples above demonstrate how we might also fruitfully understand book reviews as a means of categorizing readers. Additionally, rather than consider these typifying gestures as reductive of readers' experiences or identities, I am arguing that these gestures are actually uniquely empowering of readers. By overtly flagging certain books for certain readers (as the *Defender* does by self-consciously curating a collection of texts on race), or by showing a range of reader responses to a single text (as the "Once-a-Week Book Club" does with its motley *dramatis personae*), newspaper book reviews provide prompts for readers looking to integrate different aspects of their identities into their reading practices. The ideological engine powering this particular understanding of how reading works is the assumption that who you are and what you read are mutually influential, but not necessarily mutually deterministic. As paradoxically personalized and mass-mediated scouting reports, newspaper book reviews help figure the wilderness of the literary field as a readily available and multiply customizable site of self-fashioning through encounters with text.

Breaking News, Making News

For the remainder of this chapter, I turn to the work of a single newspaper book reviewer as a sustained example of the tensions and negotiations that I argue were characteristic of the newspaper book review's idiom of literary participation. In her capacity as a books reporter and Literary Editor for the *Chicago Tribune* from 1913 to 1963, Fanny Butcher spent most of her

adult life writing about, reflecting on, and championing her own reading practices and those of others. Born in 1888 in Freedonia, Kansas, the only child of an artist father and a mother “who placed no trust in books,” Butcher was, in her self-recollections at least, a life-long lover of books (5). In the early pages of her autobiography, *Many Lives—One Love* (1972), she remembers that books were in every room of her house except the basement and that, despite her family’s dips into poverty, she never endured a Christmas without a book.¹⁰⁶ When Butcher was young, books served as her pacifiers and playthings. Family lore held that she teathed on the family copy of *Oliver Twist*, and Butcher herself remembers “holding a book the way most babies clutch a woolly lamb and petting it” (5). As she grew older, books provided friends to “a lonely only child” (17). “When I got old enough to be teased about being ‘a little bookworm,’” Butcher writes, “reading was already an addiction” (4). After attending first the Lewis Institute and then the University of Chicago (from which she earned an A.B. degree in 1910), Butcher had hoped to parlay this “addiction” to reading into a career as an author. Her post-graduation plan seemed clear: “I was going to teach school for one year and travel abroad the next, both for experience, and then be free to write, write for the rest of my days” (25). Butcher did end up writing—a lot—for the rest of her days, but not in the form she had initially imagined. Rather than make a name for herself as a famous novelist, Fanny Butcher spent “only six months short of a half-century making deadlines at the *Chicago Tribune*,” working in the more journalistic genres of the literary report and the book review and making a name for herself as a famous reader (108).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Her most cherished childhood possession was a copy of *Black Beauty* that she received as a Christmas gift at the age of five, and as she wrote her autobiography in the 1970s, Butcher still had that volume on her bookshelves (5).

¹⁰⁷ Butcher was initially hired at the *Tribune* in 1913 as an assistant to the editor of the woman’s department, where her first assignment was to produce the paper’s “How to Earn Money at Home” column, but she quickly proved herself to be indispensably flexible, able to “dash off quickly almost any kind of drivel with the aid of a little research” (*Many Lives* 110). This skill earned her countless extra jobs (though never, she notes, any extra paychecks), and over the course of her first years at the *Tribune*, she not only filed the “How to Earn Money”

Butcher's first books column, the "Tabloid Book Review" (1915-1922), appeared weekly on the *Chicago Tribune's* "highbrow page," the front page of the Sunday features section that Butcher describes in her autobiography as "manna for those starving to read about ideas" (*Many Lives* 114). If, as Butcher wrote, the highbrow page "bubbled with ideas," then "the inclusion of my 'Tabloid Book Review' was merely to keep readers aware of other bubblers" (115). As a relatively new word to journalism, "tabloid" referred to the column's style of digested news reports condensed for easy consumption (like a "tabloid" pill of medicine).¹⁰⁸ Within this short, newsy form, Butcher also showed how "tabloid" would come to take on its more modern meaning as a style of reporting that trades in rumor, intrigue, and sensation in its marriage of the "who, what, where, when, why" style of the newswoman with the wry editorializing of the society reporter.¹⁰⁹ Appearing next to essays by critics such as H.L. Mencken, Burton Roscoe, and Floyd Dell, Butcher's "Tabloid Book Review" played with the forms of "newsiness" that helped define newspaper literary coverage.

If we dig deeper into the "Tabloid" columns, we can see how Butcher strategically pushes against the typical boundaries of "journalism" in order to make her reporting an effective

column, but also answered letters from the love-lorn and the poor, offered beauty and fashion advice, wrote etiquette columns, and poured over contest submissions from women and children. Drawing from a card catalog full of "paper names," Butcher manned pseudonymous desks across the woman's department, and she even edited (or rewrote) the "almost illiterate" efforts of other writers in the department (110). Even after Butcher had solidified her role as a books writer, she would continue to be called upon to cover various desks at the paper, serving as a crime reporter and society columnist (a role she found particularly demeaning). It would take over a year for Butcher to suggest that she might write a column about writers, which she describes as "a sneaky toe in the door, for my dreamiest hope was that one day I might edit a book section" (114). Butcher's request was granted, and in 1915 she began writing the "Tabloid Book Review," a newsy collection of items of bookish gossip that, while not a full-fledged book review column, nevertheless allowed Butcher to cultivate a name for herself as the *Tribune* readers' literary liaison.

¹⁰⁸ See "tabloid, n. and adj." meanings 2 and 3.

¹⁰⁹ For a time in the early 1920s, Butcher actually served as the *Tribune's* society reporter, reporting on the goings-on of Chicago's elite under the pseudonym "Thalia." In *Many Lives—One Love*, she writes acerbically about this span of her career (the chapter is titled, "My Debt to Society"), reflecting mostly on how writing the "Thalia" columns took her away from her real passion at the paper, covering books. That said, elements of the society column certainly find a place in Butcher's writings on books and authors, as will be discussed in more detail below.

medium through which her readers might connect with a seemingly distant literary world. Butcher would write that the distinction between journalism and criticism was a potent, even fundamental component of her professional self-definition. “Newspaper reviewers of any of the arts are essentially, I have always believed, reporters,” she writes in her autobiography (357). In the typical regime that sets journalism beneath literature and criticism, the label “reporter” may seem limiting, as an obligation to “just the facts” may hamstring a reporter’s creative energies. However, Butcher takes the journalist’s obligation to facts and re-interprets it in a broader sense as an obligation to her readers, a crucial substitution that gives her the latitude to turn her reviews into more expressive spaces. Unlike the reporter’s opposite—the critic who, with a “scalpel that can neatly cut out the book’s heart,” writes reviews in order to burnish his ego—the newspaper reviewer writes for her readers: “to entangle and stimulate the reader’s interest and to help the reader decide whether the book is one he wants to spend his time reading” (356). In this configuration of book reviewing, “the audience by whom the review will be read of necessity gives the review its form and, in a sense, its content” (356). That a book review should be useful to its reader was not a new idea: Nina Baym, for example, writes that nineteenth century newspaper reviewing was “not an art but a service, performed because readers wanted to know about current books” (21). Butcher’s innovation on this formula—and to the formula of the newspaper book review in general—is to interpret this sense of service as a deeply personal, inhabited connection between reviewer and reader. “I deeply believe that book reviewing should never be used for the personal aggrandizement of the reviewer, only to help increase and widen the inestimable pleasure of reading” (357). As we will see, Butcher’s emphasis on pleasure not only takes on the gendered meanings discussed below, but also aligns her with the type of “ordinary reader” that she imagined herself serving through her reviews.

At the heart of the more personal, intimate form of the “Tabloid Book Review” was the figure of Butcher herself. Unlike the unsigned and unattributed literary notes columns of other newspapers, the “Tabloid Book Review” always had a clear authorial presence attached to it, with Butcher’s name appearing prominently at the top of her column. Even as the “Tabloid” column and the page that contained it underwent constant revision during Butcher’s tenure, each redesign preserved a prominent space for “Fanny Butcher” in the headline art, often setting her name in hand-written font to draw even more attention to it. At various times during the column’s run, “Fanny Butcher” appeared graphically as well. Early “Tabloid” columns were headed by the figure of a female reader, half-shrouded in darkness, focused intently on an open book. The illustrations not only remind the column’s reader of the labor that has produced the column, but also of the woman who has performed that labor. For a brief time in 1917, this working woman appeared next to her columns in photographic form, sometimes looking directly at the reader, sometimes peering sideways at the column of text.¹¹⁰ Each of these visual elements adds personality and specificity to a form that was often left anonymous.

In attaching Butcher’s voice, name, and face so clearly and consistently to the “Tabloid Book Review,” the editors of the *Chicago Tribune* may have hoped to conjure a familiar new trope in turn-of-the-century journalism: the “girl reporter” or “newspaper woman.”¹¹¹ By the

¹¹⁰ Butcher was not the only columnist to receive a photographic treatment: during this time, Butcher’s column appeared regularly on a page with columns by Edward Goldbeck and Robert Herrick, each of whom had a similar author photo attached to their work (“TBR” 2/4/1917). While the two additional portraits might have lessened the striking effect of Butcher’s photograph, they instead amplified it. Butcher appears as the only woman on a page of men, a visual representation of her actual place in the world as a newspaper woman, and her presence registers both as an oddity, setting her apart from Goldbeck and Herrick, and as a tribute, suggesting that Butcher merits the same respect that her male colleagues command.

¹¹¹ Alice Fahs chronicles these pioneering “newspaper women” in *Out on Assignment*, where she argues that the women who worked for newspapers from the Gilded Age into the early 1900’s made the most of an unprecedented opportunity to visibly influence the public sphere and develop new types of public subjectivities. The intellectual possibilities of newspaper work for women were only part of the equation, and Fahs is careful to emphasize how expanded participation in the public sphere very often depended on putting the newspaper woman’s body in new and unexpected places. While editors sensationalized reports from a woman in the field, the opportunity to make such reports nevertheless created emboldening experiences for newspaper women (Fahs 45-67).

time Butcher started her journalism career, the golden age of female stunt reporters such as Nellie Bly had passed; nevertheless, the arc of Butcher's twentieth-century career from woman's department to Literary Editor retreads the paths blazed by many *fin-de-siècle* newspaper women.¹¹² Butcher's work also shares a thematic investment with that of her predecessors, who used newspaper work to assert themselves in intellectual and embodied ways in a newly opened public sphere. While Butcher's book reviews may not seem as explicitly sensationalist as, say, Nellie Bly's famous trip around the world in 72 days, she still finds ways to borrow from the newspaper woman's idiom of risk and romance to talk about her seemingly more pedestrian labors. For example, in the same entry on "Book Reviews" from the *Tribune's Pictured Encyclopedia of the World's Greatest Newspaper* that gave us the metaphor of the reviewer as "scout," the author of the entry (most likely Butcher)¹¹³ transfigures book reviewing from a staid desk job to a rollicking and arduous adventure:

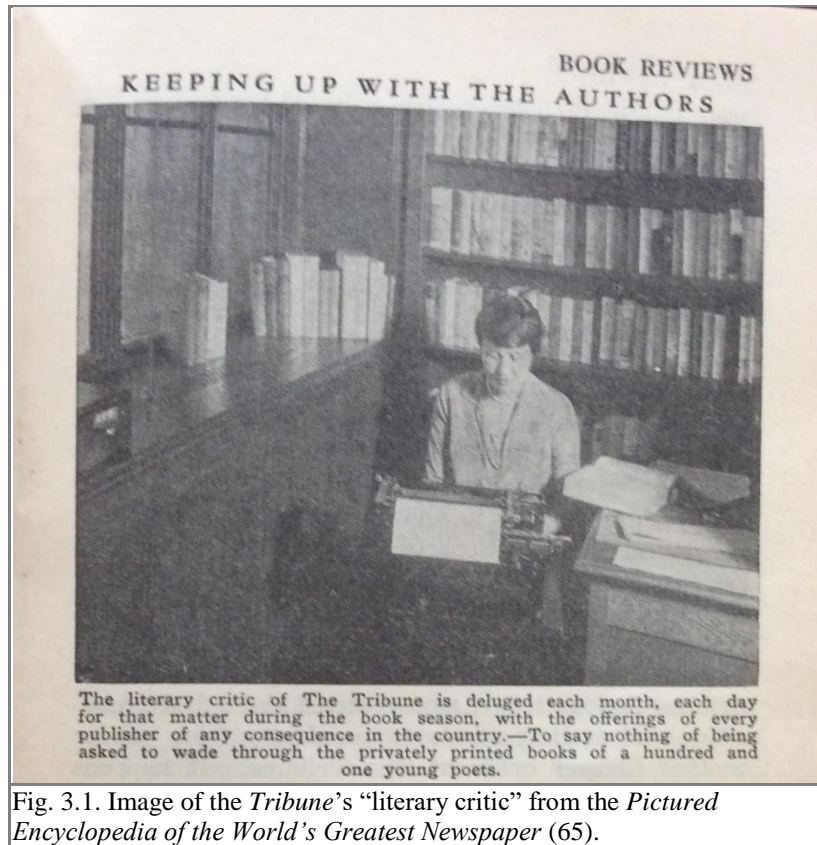
BOOK REVIEWS. It is taken for granted that a literary editor is a book lover, but even the most devout book worm would quail at sight of the continuous deluge of books which pours in upon the literary editor of The Tribune. Imagine yourself, if you will, receiving, in the quiet seasons, about twenty books a week, and in the busy seasons (early spring and early fall) having them hurtle in upon you like the Huns from the north. Imagine yourself making out a card for every book that arrives, and by the end of the year seeing your filing case overflowing its capacity of a thousand inhabitants, to a hopeless extent. Then picture yourself reading and reviewing all of them, and you will have a good notion of the demands made upon The Tribune literary editor. (63-64)

¹¹² Fahs devotes a page and a half to Butcher's early years at the *Tribune*, citing her as an example of a woman reporter who used a series of odd jobs in the women's department as a launchpad to a long and full career at a daily paper (89-90).

¹¹³ While I have no direct evidence that Butcher wrote the entry on "book reviews" for the *Pictured Encyclopedia*, it seems highly likely that she did. In terms of style, the prose of the entry, with its long, sometimes rambling sentences full of imagery and metaphor, match Butcher's other writing. And given Butcher's descriptions of working conditions at the *Tribune*, where she often took on extra work, especially if it might bring more attention to her columns, it is easy to imagine that the only way "book reviews" would have a spot in the *Encyclopedia* is if Butcher had provided the copy herself.

From its beginning, this passage replaces the feminized figure of a “book lover” with a much more heroic counterpart. The book reviewer must wrangle the ceaseless output of authors and publishers that comes in an undifferentiated “deluge” like “the Huns.” Only after cataloguing the “hopeless extent” of books can the reviewer sit down to read them, but by then “reading and reviewing” are yoked together not by “love” or pleasure, but by “demands” made by publishers, a public, the books themselves—demands that insist on an impossible fantasy of complete organization (“every book,” “all of them”). While she may not be Nellie Bly, the book reviewer must still be daring and brave.

If the description of the book reviewer’s world comes as a surprise, so does the eventual appearance of the book reviewer. The ruckus of the *Pictured Encyclopedia*’s written description of reviewing is neutralized by the following page, where the reviewer herself appears: she is a rather unremarkable woman shown to be hard at work, eyes focused downward at a typewriter as she sits in front of an orderly shelf full of books (fig. 3.1). If the image’s title, “Keeping Up with the Authors,” reprises some the written description’s bluster, the calm of the photograph and the utter control of the reviewer deflates much of the text’s bravado. After a harrowing account of the book reviewer’s job, the photograph is almost reassuring in its unremarkability, almost comforting in its association of the Herculean tasks of the reviewer with such an unassuming—and unassumingly feminine—body.



In its disruptive pairing of image and text, the *Pictured Encyclopedia* makes a case for the book review's potential for thrills, locating this thrilling labor in an unmistakably familiar and feminine realm of reading and pleasure. Butcher's columns make a similar suggestion, not only in their headlines and visual design, but also in the deeply personal content and method of their reporting. In fact, Butcher's insistence that readers recognize the uniquely embodied forms of labor that go into her reviews is one of the hallmarks of her reviewing style. Throughout her columns, Butcher appears to pay little heed to journalistic ideals of objectivity and detachment as she inserts herself into the news she relays to her readers:

"Frank Danby" is seriously ill in her country home in England. The word came to me the other day as news of that sort has a way of coming—so unexpectedly that it didn't seem possibly true. (6/6/1915)

Vachel Lindsay—the Nicholas has been excised—confides in a personal letter the sources of 'The Congo' (2/14/1915)

When I was in San Francisco I went to see her and she proudly showed me the wreath [...]. It was the first official poet laurel that I had ever seen. (9/5/1915)

From Corra Harris' own lips comes the assurance that 'The Co-Citizens' [...] (10/3/1915)

Through such subtle cues, Butcher emphasizes her inextricability from the news she reports. Whether she receives news in the form of a letter or, more intimately, from the author's own lips, Butcher presents herself as an invaluable mediator between literary newsmakers and curious readers, willing to exert physical and social energy to obtain the story. Consider how different Butcher's first-person reports are from the "Fresh Literary Notes" cited above, which merely compiled news rather than found and reported it. In a practical sense—that is, considered from the point of view of Butcher's readers who are turning to her column for help in "scouting" the literary field—Butcher's presence within the text of columns gives readers an intimate point of access into the literary world. But in a political sense, Butcher's constant references to her physical, intellectual, and social labors appear to be calculated attempts to reclaim her labor and skill from a print apparatus that would seek to anonymize or downplay her individual efforts. That Butcher performs such work on behalf of her anonymous readers further burnishes her credentials as a worthwhile literary scout.

At times, these moments of self-insertion can seem excessive, something that Butcher herself is aware of in the following notice from a trip to New York:

This hasn't anything to do with the literary situation in either the big city or the provinces, but I am probably the only living literary editor who has ridden down 5th avenue in one of the new Fords. Mr. Russell Doubleday has the only one in private captivity on Long Island, and he brought it into town and took me for a ride. ("Books" 3/24/1928)

Butcher readily admits that news of her joyride is superfluous to "the literary situation," which, in a way, is what should make it so interesting to her readers: here is their own "literary editor"

hobnobbing with publishing royalty in a dear and intimate way. The anecdote is so obviously self-serving—and yet, Butcher’s slight self-deprecation and clear joy in retelling the incident make it almost endearing. Butcher often found herself in a position to report from the literary metropolises of New York, London, and Paris, and her special reports from these exotic locales all share a similar quality. As she recounted stories of literary celebrities from the teas and dinner parties she would attend, Butcher demonstrated her own closeness to the epicenters of literary culture while graciously inviting her readers to join in. Far from being meaningless or unrelated to the literary situation, such episodes repeatedly reinforced the unique nature of Butcher’s personal and pleasurable involvement in the literary world and, crucially, how generously she put her access to work for her own readers.

Butcher’s sense of service to her readers ultimately saves her self-aggrandizing gestures from total solipsism. Certainly, many of the “Tabloid” columns do ostentatiously burnish Butcher’s credentials as a well-connected member of the literary world, but Butcher always makes it clear that her participation in this world is a means to serve her readers. Even as Butcher eagerly celebrates the glamour of the New York scene, for example, she is careful not to make it appear too glamorous or too out of reach for her readers. In fact, she takes pains to carve out a distinct space in New York for her midwestern readers. Butcher’s reports from the east coast are rife with assurances for her readers that the Midwest in general—and Chicago in particular—has a special role to play in American literary culture. Often these reports simply trumpet the success of midwestern authors. “All New York is talking about two ‘runaway’ best sellers—and both of them are written by Chicagoans!” begins one 1940 article in which Butcher relishes the chance to report to her readers that Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book* have wowed the New York literati (“Books” 3/27/1940). At other moments, Butcher offers

“midwesternness”—a tacit sensibility that she and her readers share—as a helpful corrective to the coastal and European literary scenes. For example, she notes in a 1929 column that at a “small London luncheon party” held specifically for “the visiting literary editor” (read: Fanny Butcher), three famous English authors in attendance—Frank Swinnerton, H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett—pleasantly surprised Butcher with their reception:

I expected a certain characteristic English aloofness about them. I was totally unprepared for the almost midwestern chumminess with which they greeted me and talked with me. Not only were they all turning, as it were, the keys of literary London over to me, but they were all extremely interested in Chicago and the middle west. (“Books” 7/6/1929)

The underlying assumption here seems to be that Butcher not only elicits interest in the Midwest, but also acts as a vector for midwestern *mores*, infecting those around her with pleasantness and practicality. She can even elicit a latent midwestern pride from the staunchest of Anglophiles, T.S. Eliot. Butcher reports from a dinner party in New York that, despite “talking perfect Cambridge English,” Eliot fondly recollected the World’s Fair in St. Louis, his hometown. Butcher also remarks that Eliot “look[ed] exactly like his brother, whom we all used to know in Chicago,” staking a further claim in Eliot’s indelible midwesternness and helping to convert Eliot back into an all-American boy from St. Louis. (“It is ironic that he is in the English but not the American Who’s Who,” she adds as a parenthetical aside.) The effect of this and other mentions of the Midwest in Butcher’s columns is to underscore her allegiance to her readers first and to personal gain second, even when other cues in the columns suggest otherwise. Butcher is—as she presumes her readers to be—an avid consumer of literary culture who, despite the distance between New York and Chicago, craves the attention of the literary center. The difference between Butcher and her readers—and the validation for her literary reporting—is that she can ultimately bridge this distance, paving the way for her readers to follow.

Butcher's advocacy for midwestern letters is one example of how the imagined space of a newspaper book review might mediate the geographic and cultural distance that her readers may have felt from East Coast centers of literary culture. For readers who may not have the same physical opportunities to interact with famous authors and publishers, reading Butcher's columns serves as an imaginative proxy for this type of intimate contact. This contact is made even more intimate by Butcher's repeated insistence on sharing (rather than effacing or erasing) the physical and social work that goes into her reports. At times, Butcher's columns even provided material proxies for this type of contact. In a fascinating (albeit short-lived) "Tabloid" feature, the *Tribune* reproduced autographs of famous authors at the end of Butcher's columns. Readers were given express instructions to cut the autograph out of the newspaper and paste it into their copy of the author's latest book. These tiny emblems of popular authors such as Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, Vicente Blasco Ibanez, and Hugh Walpole—provided "especially for Tabloid readers" ("TBR" 12/28/1919) to be "carefully pasted on the flyleaf" ("TBR" 1/25/1920)—encapsulate the complicated intimacy that Butcher's columns in particular—and, I argue, newspaper book reviews in general—encouraged toward literary culture. On the one hand, the facsimile autographs represent the growing cult of celebrity that mass media enabled for authors.¹¹⁴ The whole feature was predicated on the popularity of the authors and the assumption that the *Tribune's* readers would have already purchased a copy of the author's latest book (probably after reading about it in the *Tribune's* literary coverage). On the other hand, by rendering the autographs in cheap, cut-and-pasteable newsprint, the feature undermined more auratic forms of celebrity and inverted the usual hierarchy between authors and readers. Armed

¹¹⁴ See Galow for an account of how F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein used the ever-expanding channels of mass-media communication to consolidate and propagate their public personae. Butcher fits very much into the paradigm Galow describes, with the important difference that she uses similar channels for growing her celebrity not as an author *per se*, but as an advocate of readers and reading.

only with scissors, paste, and the daily *Tribune*, the reader back home could create her own literary cultural artifact that spoke to her imagined insider status. Of course, what the resulting mixed media object would represent most was the owner's status as a reader of the "Tabloid Book Review." All of these complicated negotiations took place at the end of Butcher's columns, which were themselves complicated documents of real and imagined connection as Butcher modeled for her readers a way to gain access to the private spaces of the literary field.

Ordinary Reading

In their manipulation of journalistic forms and strategies, the "Tabloid Book Reviews" do tend to downplay one major means of connecting with literary culture: reading. For discussions of actual reading, we need to look at Butcher's later reviews, those that she wrote for the *Tribune* after earning the title of Literary Editor in 1922. If the "Tabloid Book Review" emphasized Butcher's skills as a "reporter" who put her connections to work for her readers, then her later columns, more essayistic in style, emphasized Butcher's more literary skills. (Here, the sometimes ambivalent distinction between journalism and criticism, traced in the first section of this chapter, clearly informed the nature of Butcher's evolving role at the paper.) In her later, longer columns, which are more recognizable to modern readers as "book reviews," Butcher gave more sustained attention to texts themselves: she would evaluate a book's story, character, and form, often gesturing to how the work fit within larger generic or national literary traditions. While the ostensible purpose of these reviews remained helping readers decide whether or not to read the book, these later reviews also gave Butcher another form in which to assert her own particular skills, habits, and attitudes as a reader. This final section will examine how Butcher negotiates yet another tension inherent in the newspaper book review form: the tension between how she accounts for her own reading practices and how she differentiates those practices from

those of her audience. Trading in the typological idiom discussed above, Butcher carves out a place of privilege for those readers and reading practices called “ordinary” or “general,” even as she tries hard to distinguish herself from this label. In Butcher’s dialectical approach to the ordinary and the literary, we can find yet another model of understanding how the newspaper book review served as a textual space in which readers could imagine themselves as particular types of readers.

In the same way that the “Tabloid Book Reviews” showcase Butcher’s intimate access to the literary world, her later columns (and indeed, many of the “Tabloid” pieces) put a spotlight on Butcher’s reading. After all, her social connectivity to authors, publishers, and readers is only one of her assets as a reviewer: she also demonstrates to her readers a type of textual connectivity that we earlier glossed (with the help of O.H. Cheney) as “bookishness.” Her columns abound with casual references to the breadth, assiduity, and flexibility of her reading practices. Often taking the form of sweeping generalizations about the state of literary affairs, remarks such as the following are so frequent in Butcher’s writing that they are practically a stylistic tic:

Mr. Dreiser’s novel *The Genius* is the most praised and condemned book that I know of. (“TBR” 1/2/1916)

There is no one writing in America today who has a more acute sense of texture and color and fragrance and melody than Joseph Hergesheimer. (“Books” 10/22/1922)

Booth Tarkington has never—at least so far as I have read him—written a book that is palpably bad” (“Books” 1/19/1924)

These moments of hyperbole serve a similar purpose to Butcher’s frequent mentions of her personal contact with literary newsmakers, but with a key difference: they highlight Butcher’s work as a tireless reader rather than her work as a socially-connected reporter. If her obituaries

are to be trusted, Fanny Butcher read a book a day for much of her life—“and unlike some reviewers,” she crows in her autobiography, “I always read every word of every book I wrote about” (127). This reputation for thorough, copious, critical reading was always a central tenet of Butcher’s professional identity. By hedging her otherwise gnomic declarations—adding “that I know of” or “at least so far I have read him,” for example—Butcher uses these references to her own reading practices to authenticate her expertise.

Additionally, these frequent reminders of Butcher’s knowledgeable ability (and the work she performs to justify her claims to knowledge) tend to reference texts from all corners of the literary field. The breadth of Butcher’s reading signifies as an endorsement of her ability to “scout” for the many types of readers who come to her column. Fanny Butcher herself may have particular tastes, but as a reader-reviewer, she demonstrates an almost chameleonic ability to adopt the mindset of a wide variety of readers as they encounter a wide variety of texts. When she remarks in a review of *Handicraft for Boys* that the non-fiction guide “even fascinates the old lady who hasn’t been a tomboy since her last escapade with white mice and a cage,” she is commenting as much on the book as on her abilities as a reader (“Tabloid” 11/9/1918). Presenting herself as a limit case (“the old lady” with a “tomboy” past) for the audience for this book, she is able to endorse both the book and her own imaginative agility: she can deftly review a text at the very limits of her readerly comfort zone. She employs a similar strategy in her note for *Football and How to Watch It*. In a parody of the language of a patent medicine ad, Butcher offers herself as a test case for the book’s promised effects while subtly commenting on her receptivity as a reader:

Until I read this book I was one of those football enthusiasts who are thrilled by the crowds and the bands and the singing and the mass madness, but who, after many years of ardent attendance at Stagg Field, still couldn’t be sure which side scores until I looked at the score board. Since using *Football and How to Watch*

It, I have never had a recurrence of my malady. I shall use no other. (“Books” 5/12/1923)

Both of these examples highlight Butcher’s ability to read as two people at once, herself and another imagined reader, an ability that she likens to having a pair of “schizophrenic antennae” at one point in her autobiography (437). With one antenna tuned to the interests of her readers and the other to the vision of the authors she reads, Butcher serves her readers by processing a wide variety of texts, sorting them into groups according to their various genres and uses, and even judging them on their literary merits or usefulness to readers—all without ceding too much to her own personal tastes. The resulting image of Butcher as a reader is one of great expertise, but also great flexibility, able to meet the challenges of any type of text or reader.

Butcher’s frequent references to her knowledgeability and adaptability as a reader are tempered by descriptions of reading that access a more personal and emotional register. As much as Butcher claims to *know* about books, she also models a type of reading that is deeply pleasurable. Take, for example, the following description of her encounter with H.G. Well’s *The Research Magnificent*:

In that month the book has been reviewed from one end of the country to the other, but I have not written anything about it for the good reason that I have been all of this time reading it. A little at a time, with much thought spent between the sentences, with all sorts of comments and memories and injunctions crying to be written in the margins, and with the towering immensity of the thing awing me into either an incoherence of superlatives or silence. I have waited for the clarity of impression that comes with the slow closing of the covers of a book that has marked an epoch in my literary life. (“TBR” 10/24/1915)

By keying the description of her reading experience to what she calls the novel’s “sheer literary magnificence,” Butcher has in turn made something magnificent out of her reading. By sharing this moment of intimacy with her readers, she gives them a model for their own magnificent encounters. Butcher is fond of such descriptions, no doubt because they remind her readers that

she, presumably like them, takes great pleasure in the simple act of reading. They also remind her readers that Butcher is, like them, always engaging with books in embodied ways. In a similar scene to the one shown above, Butcher opens her column on Edna Ferber's *The Girls* with an extended description of the physical circumstances of her reading:

Last summer in a bed which looked out at the ominous, snow-etched grayness of Long's peak, with a battalion of gloomy thoughts perching on her shoulders, prodding her mind into fears of being seriously ill a thousand miles from a home, the Tabloid person read the galley proofs of a book.

No book could have been read under less favorable circumstances. ("TBR" 10/16/1921)

With the "snow-etched grayness" and "gloomy thoughts" of a sick bed far from home, Butcher constructs a rather hostile environment for reading: she continues, "Three or four other books had been started, listlessly read for a few pages, and as listlessly allowed to slip out of uninterested fingers." The gloom of the scene is matched by Butcher's own distance from the act of reading—she refers to herself as "the Tabloid person"—but eventually, Ferber's book can cut through the "less than favorable circumstances" and provide a deeply enjoyable reading experience. Butcher goes on to praise Ferber's book for its "sheer human realness," a quality that, in some ways, Butcher primes her reader to accept by first describing her own reading of the novel in such human terms.

Butcher's "schizophrenic antennae" thus seem tuned to a variety of dichotomies that roughly map the tensions that become generic features of the book review itself, tensions between journalism and criticism, between typology and peculiarity, and ultimately between the "ordinary" and "literary." In the varied ways she presents herself as a reader, Butcher moves among these various dynamic aspects of her reading as the occasion (or the text) suits her. That she often performs both types of readerly work in the space of a single column—and even a

single a sentence—makes her a particularly compelling practitioner of the newspaper book review’s peculiar brand of cultural instruction. In the end, Butcher circumscribes her own readerly “type,” the type who can encompass all of these modes of reading at once, something she models quite vividly in the opening to her review of Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922):

To speak frankly, this review of *One of Ours* is going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever done. There are too many psychological subtleties entangled in the writing of it, too many unconscious spiritual reactions pulling my judgment this way and that. (“News and Views of Books”)

Butcher stages a rhetorical wrestling match between her two different ways of reading, between her “judgment” on the one hand and her “unconscious spiritual reactions” on the other. The rest of the review is similarly bifurcated and tense, as it oscillates between a desire to label Cather’s novel a naturalist masterpiece and a discomfort with the novel’s portrayal of soldiering (something “no woman, no matter how intimate her association with the war, can really know the intimacies of,” writes Butcher). As the review ends on an ambiguous note, Butcher demonstrates adeptly how the various dimensions of her reading practice all combine to contribute to her approach to an individual text—a capacious reading practice that underscores her value as a reviewer to a wide variety of readers.

Interestingly, while Butcher’s reading comes to be described in terms of breadth and flexibility, her audience’s reading habits take on opposite qualities of fixity, narrowness, and predictability. Throughout her writings on books and readers, Butcher circumscribes the reading practices of her audience according to a very narrow sense of their interests, attitudes, and habits, using the texts they read to define them as readers. As with the “Once-a-Week Book Club” and the *Chicago Defender* columns discussed above, Butcher’s typological understanding of readers and texts is not necessarily negative. In general, Butcher demonstrates a fairly egalitarian tolerance toward the wide variety of readers and reading practices represented by her column’s

audience. Thus, the sheer variety of reading practices that Butcher writes for in her column not only demonstrates her agility as a reviewer and reader, but also celebrates the agility of all readers by highlighting the endless ways in which a reader can interact with the world of print around her. This multiplicity does, however, lead to an unresolved tension throughout Butcher's columns: as she models such a broad sense of reading, she also seems to impose limits on others, denying, in a sense, that other readers might have similarly varied encounters. This tension manifests itself in a decidedly snobbish streak that runs through much of Butcher's writing, especially when she writes about the class of books that she calls "literature."

As with the other books that Butcher reviews, "literature" tends to align with a specific type of reader: literary books are "thinking novels—and therefore for thinking readers," she writes at one point, which leaves all other readers in the pejorative category of the "general" or "ordinary" ("TBR" 3/27/1921). The dismissive tone of many of these moments in Butcher's writing makes them easy to dismiss as indications of her personal bias, her capitulation to taste, or even as some form of projected insecurity. We can also read these moments in a more generative way, one in keeping with this chapter's overall view of book reviews as productive spaces that generated structures for readerly participation and identification. Even as Butcher disdains the typical "ordinary reader" for the stubbornness of her tastes and habits, she also admits (though often indirectly) that being an ordinary reader—and identifying with other ordinary readers—comes with certain forms of influence. "Ordinary readers" are the most likely of Butcher's typological readers to mis-read (at least in Butcher's estimation), and their mis-readings are especially egregious when encountering literature. Presented with art, "ordinary readers" find only stories, a fact that Butcher decries again and again as she holds out hope in the transformative power of the best of books. However, while one ordinary reader is merely

stubborn, a group of ordinary readers has the power to shape the literary marketplace. Butcher's book reviews do not shy away from this fact, but instead provide an (albeit ambivalent) idiom in which an individual ordinary reader can understand her personal habits as a part of a larger whole.

Many of Butcher's most memorable encounters with ordinary readers come in her columns about "literature," and few authors were as literary to Fanny Butcher as fellow midwesterner Willa Cather. For Butcher, "Willa Cather was a critic's dream of a writer" ("Literary Spotlight"), and throughout her columns on Cather, Butcher is fascinated by Cather's writing, an economy of prose that Butcher calls "sheer writing" ("Books" 8/15/1931). In her review of *A Lost Lady*, for example, Butcher writes, "When Willa Cather uses an adjective nowadays, it glows like a light—she has stripped her style of every nonessential" ("Books" 9/15/1923). This sparse aesthetic captures Butcher's attention again and again, as nearly every Cather review she writes comments on the absence of the "nonessential," "frumpery figures" ("News"), and "every unnecessary word" ("Books" 10/23/1926). For Butcher, Cather's style comprises "the masterful strokes which have made her novels American literature," strokes that set her apart from and above other authors of the day ("Books" 9/15/1923).

But Butcher seems fascinated by Cather's style for another reason, one that goes beyond simple artistic merit. Butcher loves Willa Cather because so many other readers cannot. Praising Cather's writing becomes a means for Butcher to identify and celebrate Cather's readers—at least, those sensitive enough (in Butcher's estimation, at least) to truly appreciate the fineness and craft behind her prose. A moment from Butcher's review of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* shows how she uses Cather and her style as a litmus test to distinguish between "most readers" and those of a more discerning type:

Her writing is the most deceptive in the world to the ordinary reader, and never more so than in 'Death Comes for the Archbishop.' To most readers she writes such an unadorned English as to seem a pale style. There is nothing ornate, nothing gestury, nothing flowery. And yet there is no one writing in America today who has a purer, clearer, more beautiful style than Miss Cather. ("Books" 9/3/1927)

The mechanics of Butcher's apparent disdain for "most readers" merits further unpacking because of how it has identified two different vectors of literary influence. On the one hand, Butcher has nothing but praise for Willa Cather's uncompromising commitment to her art. She relishes the way that an appreciation of Cather's prose can set a reader apart from the mob of the ordinary. At one point in this same review, Butcher goes so far as to write, "We suspect—though we never could quote Miss Cather as saying so—that the public may be, so far as she is concerned, damned" ("Books" 9/3/1927). That only some readers can appreciate the craft that underwrites Cather's prose is not so much an indictment of Cather as it is of "most readers." On the other hand, however, Butcher makes it clear that, "damned" as the public may be, it still exercises a certain type of power over literary productions, even those of the most superb kind. Not even as skilled a writer as Cather can force the ordinary reader into an appreciative mode. Butcher makes this claim in a later Cather review as well, in which she calls *Shadows on the Rock* "so authentically the work of genius, so immediately perceptible as a masterpiece, so emotionally beautiful in style as to be great even to the untutored reader—to the trained critic, superb" ("Books" 8/15/1931). That the novel's greatness can be seen "even" by an untutored reader is, of course, meant as a powerful testament to Cather's art, but an author's skills can only take such a reader so far. In Butcher's understanding, it takes a "trained" reader to recognize the "superb" where others may only see the "great"—a small difference in degree, perhaps, but a difference that nonetheless insists on a firm limit to literature's ability to effect change in a reader.

The complexities of Butcher's apparent snobbery articulate an important understanding of how reading works. Rather than trust in the transformative powers of undeniably well-crafted prose to make better readers, Butcher repeatedly insists on the stubbornness of the ordinary reader's practice and imagination. Instead of the text helping to define the reader, the reader inevitably defines the text, an act of categorization that the book review, with its focus on readers and its muddled commitments to both the aesthetic and commercial values of books, is especially apt at revealing. In September 1921, for example, Butcher predicted that Edna Ferber's *The Girls* "is going to be such a best seller that a lot of gumpy readers are going to read a really good book by accident" ("TBR" 9/4/1921). The fact that the novel will become a best seller is in no way an indictment of its artistry; in fact, Butcher cheers for this inevitability (albeit in a slightly backhanded way) in the hopes that "gumpy readers" might be tricked into reading something above their class. Two years later, she makes an almost identical claim in her review of Cather's *A Lost Lady*, a novel destined to be popular, but for reasons that Butcher cannot quite endorse:

To many it will be merely a very 'nice' story of a lady who wasn't 'nice.' It will go into the class of the stories of those who, from 'Madame Bovary' down through literature, have not obeyed their marriage vows. Probably many will read it for that reason (one can't help being cynical about public taste these days!), and I, for one, hope that they will, even under a misapprehension that it will be 'naughty,' for they will find in it as fine writing and as artful a technique as anywhere in American letters today and it may, unwittingly, tempt them to finer things. ("Books" 9/15/1923)

In her typically meandering sentences, we can see Butcher struggling to reconcile *A Lost Lady*'s probable success with the novel's apparent appeal to most readers. Butcher is not so dogmatic as to deny that even a taste in the "naughty" can lead to the artful and fine. The "naughty," in fact, contains such undisputed masterpieces as *Madame Bovary* and other works of "literature." Nonetheless, she stops short of claiming that even a fine naughty novel can permanently change the tastes of most novel readers. The ambiguity of "unwittingly" shows how readers end up

maintaining control in this equation: while readers may unwittingly (not knowingly) consume a masterpiece under the guise of popularity, the novel works just as unwittingly (having no clear and rational path to success) in its possible project of making better people out of its readers.

Butcher's interest in this type of ambiguity, which upsets a hierarchical understanding of author and reader, should in no way be taken as an unalloyed endorsement of readerly agency. In fact, Butcher seems as interested in the institutions that determine reader stubbornness as she is in the effects of that stubbornness on the literary field. When Butcher writes, "You'll read it, probably. All of the novel readers will," in a disappointed review of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Head of the House of Coombe*, the generic label "novel" immediately circumscribes any individual reader's agency. Like the reader interested in *A Lost Lady*'s naughtiness, the "novel reader" brings a certain set of expectations to Burnett's text, expectations that in turn lead Butcher to bemoan that "the author hasn't been more of an artist and less of a successful novelist" ("TBR" 2/5/1922). Butcher makes similar claims in almost all of her reviews of Edna Ferber, whose involvement with the genre of the magazine short story Butcher sees as wholly structuring of most ordinary readers' experience of Ferber's work. In 1920, Butcher laments how a "magazine-mad nation" has pigeon-holed Ferber as short-form ironist, writing always under the "weight of the mantle of O. Henry that magazine editors threw over her shoulders" ("TBR" 5/23/1920). She continues:

If she could ever be completely herself in her work [...] if she could completely shake off Mr. O. Henry's smothering garment, she might well be one of America's great writers, instead of one of the most popular magazine writers of our magazine-mad nation. ("TBR" 5/23/1920)

Again, the generic label "magazine" (contrasted here with "great" as Butcher describes the type of writer Ferber might be) serves as a shorthand for the ways in which readers participate in the processes of literary success. According to Butcher, the expectations of magazine fiction

determine how readers interact with Ferber's work, and while Ferber seems to be at the mercy of her readers, her readers are likewise at the mercy of the institutions in which they read. In an earlier review, Butcher outlines two similar options for Ferber, who might become either "one of America's most vital writers" or "merely continue to be one of America's most popular fictionists" ("TBR" 10/28/1917).¹¹⁵ In each instance, yoking Ferber's success and artistic maturation to these expectations simultaneously gives agency to magazine fiction readers while gesturing toward the institutional contexts that limit that agency.

As she tells her many readers what "many readers" will inevitably think of—and do to—authors and their products, Butcher may seem to be making claims on rather precarious grounds. After all, the "many readers" that she speaks of so often are also *her* readers, and even as she legitimizes such readers as active (though circumscribed) participants in literary culture, she still tends to hold them in mild contempt. Butcher's invocations of other readers thus raises serious questions about the tone and audience of her own writing, as well as about her own position as a writer subject to readerly whims. Ultimately, by identifying more as a reader herself than a writer, Butcher manages to limit her exposure to such critiques. Returning to her review of *The Girls*, for example, we can see how Butcher stakes her claim to extra-ordinariness on explicit evidence of her reading:

Because Edna Ferber is a 'popular' writer many readers are going to think 'The Girls' is only a popular novel. But the honest critic who reads it will feel its reality, its proud fineness. ("TBR" 10/16/1921)

The difference in verbs between the many readers who "think" something about *The Girls* and the honest critic who actually "reads" it not only speaks volumes about how Butcher understands her own role as a critic; the contrast also allows for her own readers to imagine themselves as

¹¹⁵ In 1927, she again jabs at "the demanding American magazine reading public" that keeps Ferber wedded to the short story form, even when, Butcher argues, "Edna Ferber is at her best in the novel" ("Books" 4/23/1927).

something more than just one of the “many.” As long as Butcher’s readers read like Butcher, then they can practice the same types of responses that allow Butcher to make claims about her honesty and superiority as a reader. At times, Butcher goes so far as to model her reading habits for her readers, not only by explaining her reactions to texts, but also by describing her physical behaviors, as she does in this review of Carl Sandburg’s *Good Morning, America*:

The top of my copy bristles with small papers marking pages. [...] Read for yourselves. Do your own marking with scraps of paper bristling in a booktop. (“Books” 10/20/1928)

At other times, however, Butcher singles out this sort of mimicry for special contempt. In a notice for a new collection of “Great American Short Stories” edited by William Dean Howells, Butcher glibly identifies the book as “for the person whose taste in literature is in direct proportion to the literary reputation of the person who plants the seeds of knowledge in his mind” (“TBR” 1/11/1920). As a seed-planter herself, such a comment comes across as rather barbed and self-serving, but it also highlights yet again the fundamental unevenness and complexity of Butcher’s attitudes toward reading. By downplaying and devaluing such transparent opportunities for the “ordinary reader” to lift herself into a higher state of readership, Butcher may come off as snobbish. However, embedded in this reluctance toward such obvious projects of superficial uplift, Butcher may also be making an argument for readers to make their own literary choices. The ultimate test becomes what the reader does with her volume of Howells-endorsed stories. Does she take the volume’s title as truth and assume the stories are “great,” or does she read them herself and put the volume’s title to the test? Buying a collection endorsed by Howells yields one type of readerly capital; reading in the same way as Fanny Butcher yields another. The difference between the two comes down to the act of reading itself.

In moments such as the quip about William Dean Howells and her repeated invocations of the “ordinary reader,” we are given a glimpse of a very different Fanny Butcher from the self-described humble book news reporter chasing stories and wrangling books in the service of her readership. When her columns turn to the actual business of reading, Butcher tends to embody the gatekeeper more than the scout as she grows protective of the literary territory that she has fenced off for herself. In these moments of dis-identification, when Butcher sets herself apart from her readers rather than adopting their mindsets in order to match them with books, Butcher actually makes an argument in favor of the ordinary reader. By insisting on tastes in books and practices of reading as fundamentally constitutive components of a person’s identity, Butcher shows how the predictability and stubbornness of a person’s reading habits can in fact be as powerful as more open-ended (and more commonly valorized) forms of reading. In her frequent invocation of the “ordinary reader” as someone who is stuck in her ways, Butcher shows how powerful a group of such ordinary readers is in shaping the reputations of authors and the contours of the literary marketplace while admitting to the limited effectiveness of reading as a means of personal change. If anything, Butcher writes about reading as a means of further becoming what you already are (something that we saw in the previous chapter in Cora Wilson Stewart’s ambivalent literacy lessons). The typological understanding of one’s self as a reader, activated by the newspaper book review’s particular forms, once again proves to be not a liability, but a powerful strategy for both textual interpretation and cultural participation.

Ultimately, Butcher provides the best description of the imaginative work she enables for her readers, and, in typical Butcher fashion, this description is one of Butcher herself. In a rare moment of regret in her autobiography, Butcher reflects on why she worked so hard and so long at a job that was often thankless and even exploitative:

I couldn't possibly have foreseen that I would spend only six months short of a half-century making deadlines at the Chicago Tribune, doubling in whatever brass happened at the moment to need tooting, never getting the book written that I was so sure would bear my name, in a way just watching the world go by. Edna Ferber once wisely said, "You can't march in a parade and see it too," but being on a newspaper comes nearer to it than any other kind of job. (108)

The nearness—yet separation—of the book reviewer from both the authors and works she reviews and the readers whom she serves defined Butcher's participation in the literary culture of her time. Indeed, the sense that Butcher was close to but not quite a part of the parade is the source of considerable pathos for the later reader of her life and work. Nevertheless, the model of observation-as-participation that Butcher sees herself as embodying throughout her career is also the stance that she makes possible for the "ordinary readers" of her work. Whether in her more journalistic mode as a literary reporter or her more critical mode as an expert reader, Butcher helped bring the parade of literary culture closer to her midwestern readers, then showed how different types of readers might join in. The tension between "marching in a parade and seeing it too" animated Butcher's work and the very ideas of reading that her columns—and newspaper book reviews more generally—helped make possible for readers.

Conclusion

Book reviews today remain contested spaces in literary culture, as authors pick fights with specific reviewers,¹¹⁶ watchdog groups question who and what gets reviewed,¹¹⁷ and readers take up the task of reviewing themselves.¹¹⁸ Whether these attacks on the book review target its

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Jonathan Franzen calling *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani "the stupidest person in New York" (Cohn), or Rita Dove's response to Helen Vendler's vicious take-down in the *New York Review of Books* of Dove's editorship of the *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2011) (Vendler; Dove).

¹¹⁷ The group VIDA, for example, publishes an annual "count" that details how many major book reviews are written by women and respond to women-authored books. In 2015, the VIDA Count expanded to include data on race and ethnicity, sexual identity, and ability.

¹¹⁸ Otis Chandler, CEO and co-founder of Goodreads.com, offers this as the rationale for the site's reader-to-reader recommendations: "when I want to know what books to read, I'd rather turn to a friend than any random person or bestseller list" ("About Goodreads").

toothlessness, its commercialization, its futility, or its elitism, at the heart of all of these disagreements and debates about book reviews are fundamental claims about the purpose of book reviews and their imagined relationship to the reader. This chapter has examined how newspaper book reviews in the early twentieth century were distinct products of this imagined relationship to a broad, mass-mediated audience of readers. Poised between authors and readers, between journalism and criticism, between the ordinary and the literary, book reviews provided a deeply ambivalent type of cultural instruction. In their typological lessons, intended for a uniquely varied audience, newspaper book reviews helped many types of readers understand themselves as “ordinary readers,” as crucial (if wholly imaginary) agents in a complex and changing literary field.

Whether we examine the work of the anonymous writers behind features like the “Once-a-Week Book Club” or the aggressively personal work of someone like Fanny Butcher, returning to the newspaper book review and seriously considering the work this genre performed for readers allows literary historians to return to a moment of possibility, when categories that now seem naturalized were only just beginning to structure literary experiences. A figure like Butcher, or papers like the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* or the *Chicago Defender*, help complicate definitions of “journalism,” “criticism,” and “literature,” as well as the too-common understanding of “literary culture” as emanating from New York for the passive consumption of the rest of the country. Furthermore, reading these book reviews for how they understand the work of readers (rather than the work of authors) restores a crucial sense of instrumentality to a genre that might otherwise be thought of simply as distanced commentary. Rather than take book reviews as evidence of textual reception, we must consider how and why they helped make a variety of textual practices possible.

Chapter 4

“A reading army as no army ever was before”:

The American Library Association’s Campaign for Books and Reading in World War I



Fig. 4.1. March 1918 American Library Association campaign for books at the New York Public Library. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. Record Series [RS] 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign [henceforth ALAA].)

In March 1918, as part of the American Library Association's (ALA) nation-wide campaign to collect books for U.S. soldiers and sailors, librarians stacked 133,000 books into a pyramid on the steps of the New York Public Library (figs. 4.1, 4.2). The pyramid marked the culmination of a week's worth of campaigning for the Library War Service, which saw librarians, soldiers, sailors, and boy scouts transform the usually staid facade of the library into "the liveliest place on Fifth Avenue" ("Expect"). For days, Director of Books for Soldiers John Foster Carr stood outside the library, shouting to passers-by through a megaphone, asking them to donate their books to the cause. A sketch of the incident in the *Literary Digest* reported that "a Fifth Avenue bus seldom got by without a hail" from Carr or another librarian ("They Do Not Need" 44). As members of the public arrived with their donations, soldiers and sailors helped pile the books onto the wooden scaffold, which was flanked by two murals that further reinforced the message of the immediate need for books. By the week's end—on "Bookless Sunday," when the public was encouraged to "strip your bookshelves, and give the findings to the soldiers"—the pyramid was complete and, more important, the campaign could be declared a success ("Expect"). On the eve of the book campaign, Herbert Putnam, General Director of the Library War Service, had told the librarians of the nation, "General Pershing wants fifty tons of reading matter every month. [...] We need at least two million gift books, and we need them now" (Letter, 9 March 1918). A month later, at the campaign's end, the librarians of New York City reported to ALA headquarters that they had collected 354,735 books—a sizable portion of the over 3 million books collected in the week's campaign by libraries across the nation ("Preliminary" 9). General Pershing would surely be pleased with the ardent efforts of America's librarians.

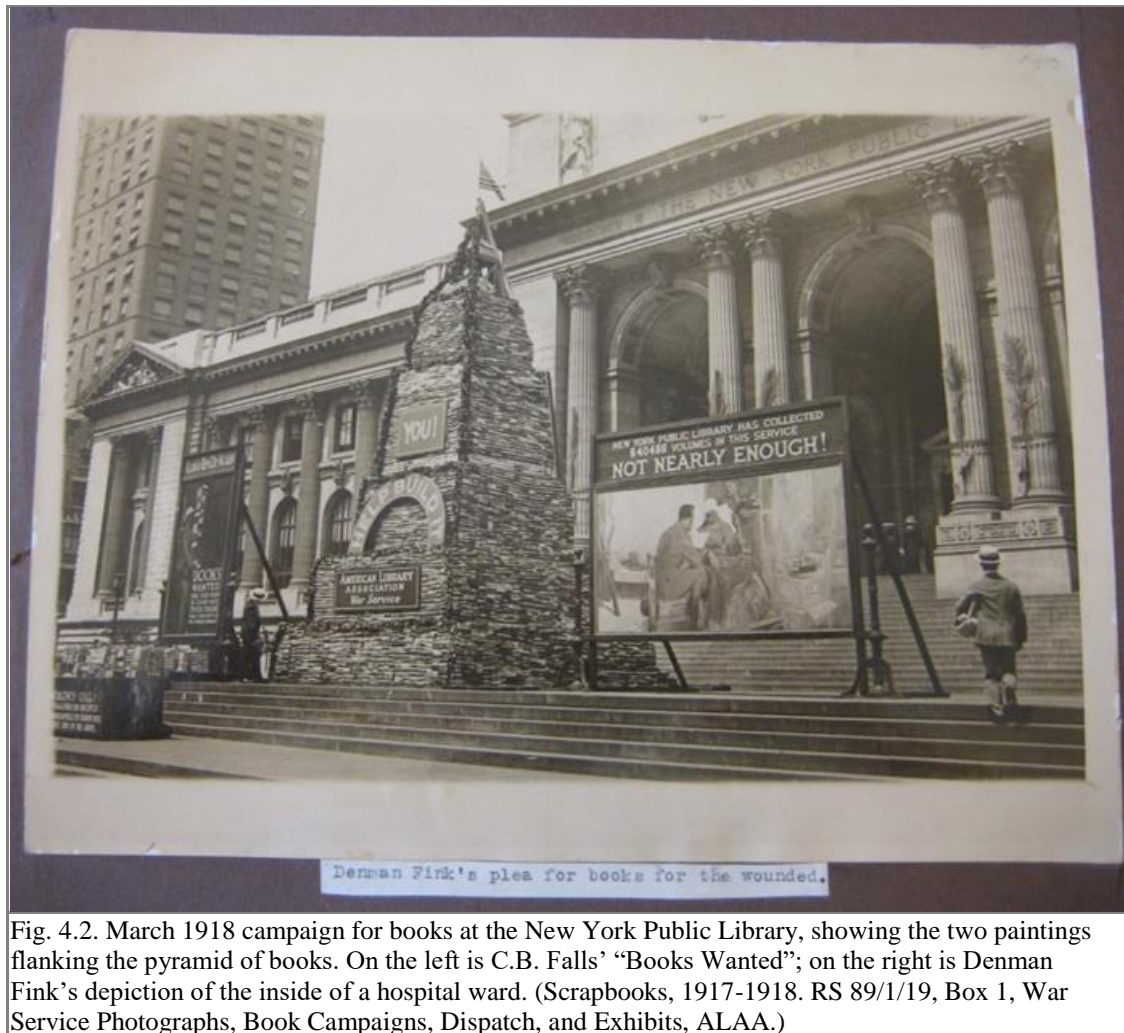


Fig. 4.2. March 1918 campaign for books at the New York Public Library, showing the two paintings flanking the pyramid of books. On the left is C.B. Falls' "Books Wanted"; on the right is Denman Fink's depiction of the inside of a hospital ward. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

Photographs of the NYPL book campaign provide evocative evidence of the remarkable library-military complex that developed out of the United States' participation in World War I. A beaming sailor sitting atop a heap of books; a female librarian in the martial uniform of the Library War Service shouting from amid the growing pyramid; an unruly pile of reading matter stockpiled like munitions in a library dispatch center—these images bristle with the seeming incongruities that come from treating books and magazines as materiel of war (figs. 4.3, 4.4, 4.5). Of course, World War I was not the first time Americans had made concerted efforts to arm a fighting force with books and magazines. During the Civil War, soldiers eagerly consumed

magazines and newspapers as a way of keeping up with the war. Certain regiments even had their own library collections, while civilian organizations such as the United States Christian Commission inundated troops with donated books, magazines, and religious tracts.¹¹⁹ Nor would the ALA's efforts be the last time that providing reading materials to soldiers would take on an element of national pride and necessity. A mere twenty-five years later, the Council on Books in Wartime elevated the idea that "books are weapons in the war of ideas" from an idealistic credo to "a national book policy" (Hench 8).¹²⁰ While the ALA's quickly executed, largely improvised efforts during WWI may lack the logistical sophistication or ideological unity of other wartime book campaigns, they nonetheless represent both a fascinating episode in the material history of books and a watershed moment in the history of reading. For, as the American Library Association campaigned to collect books and funds to support its mission of providing free library services to U.S. troops, the association also launched one of the largest systematic publicity appeals in support of widespread, general reading in the country's history.

¹¹⁹ See Koch, *Books in the War* (1-3), for the ALA's own account of the rarity of reading material for troops in the Civil War. Later historians have revised this assessment (see Hovde; Fahs, *Imagined Civil War*).

¹²⁰ The publishers, librarians, and booksellers of the CBW worked with the government's Office of War Information and the Departments of the Army and Navy to distribute 120 million books to soldiers and sailors, as well as another 3.6 million books to civilians in occupied countries (*A History of the Council on Books in Wartime* 3).

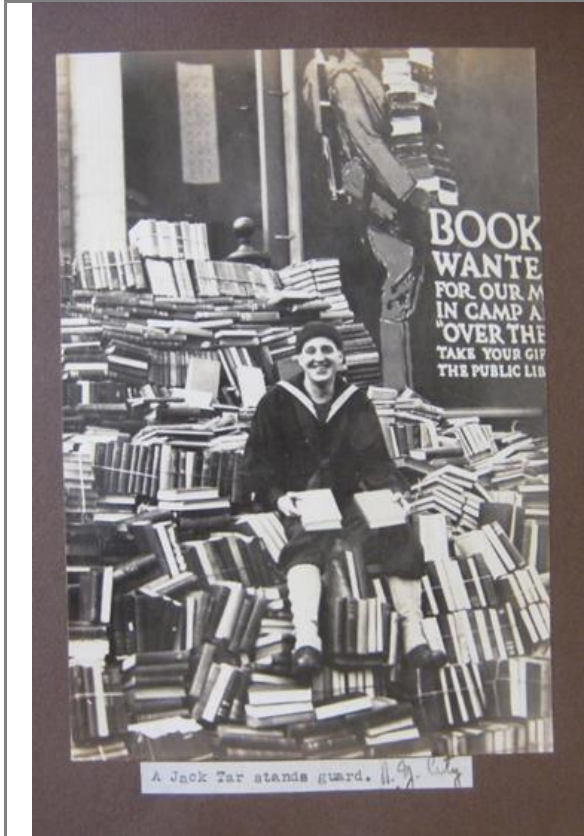


Fig. 4.3. "A Jack Tar stands guard" on the steps of the NYPL. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.4. "Still the books come." (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.5. View from inside a Library War Service dispatch center. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

When the Library War Service has been studied by scholars before, it is usually in terms of the extent to which the logistical and ideological challenges of building a national military library service from the ground up changed the ALA as a professional and public organization. The only book-length treatment of the ALA's wartime activities, Arthur P. Young's *Books for Sammies: The American Library Association and World War I* (1981), argues that the LWS was an organizational turning point for the ALA, as the introduction of professional management principles permanently changed the organization's internal and external relations (xii). Other historians have focused instead on what the LWS left unchanged about the ALA, especially in terms of how war service solidified rather than challenged the gendered and racial prejudices that were built into the structures of professional librarianship.¹²¹ This chapter builds on the work of such scholars by focusing on one logistical aspect of the LWS that has hitherto been downplayed: the publicity campaigns that broadcast the ALA's ideologies about libraries, books, and reading to a nation-wide audience. Stunts such as the one staged on the steps of the NYPL were only part of the ALA's awareness-raising operations. In special bulletins and internal memoranda meant to mobilize local libraries, press releases and human interest stories aimed to win over the general public, and posters and pamphlets designed to lure soldiers into camp libraries, the ALA not only publicized its services to a specific set of readers, but also gave soldiers and the everyday readers back home who supported them an idiom through which they might understand their own reading as an ethical practice—and a nationalized practice—of modern subject formation. The ALA's wartime publicity shows how an institution such as the public library and the professionals who worked there imagined themselves mediating ideas

¹²¹ See Garrison and Bristow, discussed in more detail below.

about books and reading in ways that conceptualized reading as a method for mediating the physical, psychological, and rhetorical ruptures of modern war.

The opening section of this chapter provides a brief historical sketch of the ALA's Library War Service, focusing specifically on how ALA leaders conceived of military library service as a unique opportunity for developing their profession. As other scholars have noted, library leaders had high hopes for the LWS: finally, so the thinking went, librarians had the chance to prove themselves to other professionals by executing a logistically complicated plan on a national stage. In the process, librarians hoped their new association with military masculinity might improve the standing of their traditionally feminized profession. While such changes to the library profession ultimately never came—a fact that has caused many to dismiss the LWS as a curious blip in library history—I show how the LWS actually provided librarians with a radically new chance to publicize these desires, specifically as a part of wartime mobilization. Rather than focus on the LWS's logistical feats or ideological failings, I argue, we should understand this episode as a moment of consolidation for nationalized ideologies about reading. The next section of the chapter considers how the ALA's publicity strategies built on existing models for library publicity while also incorporating specific wartime details. The most valuable detail of all was the figure of the “soldier-reader,” a unique type of reader, forged in the peculiar exigencies of reading in war, who nonetheless reflected broader ideas about how libraries, books, and reading might function in modern American life. As I show through the next three sections, anecdotes and visual depictions of the “soldier-reader” allowed the ALA to associate the self-directed, purposive, idiosyncratic reading habits of soldiers and sailors with American military might. According to publicity materials, soldier-readers were worthy of praise and emulation because they chose to read a variety of texts in order to learn, to relax, and to

recover. By choosing to read, soldier-readers were in turn granted an exemption from many of the usual frameworks used to judge or evaluate readers, particularly those rules of taste related to the perceived value of different genres of books. The Library War Service's vision of reading, made possible by the convergence of reading and war, extended already-circulating ideas about the democratization of reading practices into newly-enabled martial, modern, and masculine forms. In the same way that librarians hoped that war service would put them in touch with new types of readers (namely, young, minimally educated men), historians of reading also stand to gain insights—albeit highly mediated insights—into a groups of readers whose histories are not usually recorded or preserved.

If using soldiers to talk about reading allowed the ALA to make certain claims about reading, then the reverse is also true: using reading as a lens onto U.S. troops yields a much different image of who fought for the United States. As I show in the final section of this chapter, the ALA claimed to represent “a reading army,” and I trace how the use of “reading” as a proxy for inclusion in a national imaginary both radically expands and delimits the types of people who might be included or excluded, particularly in times of war. The LWS camp or hospital library, according to publicity materials at least, was the ultimate American melting pot, where the soldier who made the affirmative choice to read could erase his national and linguistic difference and become, simply, “American.” However, not everyone was included in this rosy vision of a diverse American army, and the near-total exclusion of African American readers from LWS materials reveals the limits of this humanitarian understanding of reading. Finally, I end by considering how the LWS publicity materials fit into long-standing narratives about World War I as a particularly “literary war”—a label that tends to exclude American soldiers and the American readers and library patrons at home who supported them. While the ALA's publicity

materials may not reflect the realities of U.S. military reading, they still provide a powerful, public accounting of the role reading played in coalescing wartime ideas of American national character. In fact, these highly mediated, highly stylized depictions of soldier-readers may tell us more about the constellation of desires attached to reading than actual evidence of what and how soldiers read.

Librarians Go to War

When the United States formally declared war against Imperial Germany on 7 April 1917, the American Library Association was, at forty years old, still a fledgling professional organization. With only 3,300 members (most of them from public libraries in the East and Midwest) and a yearly operating budget of \$24,000, the ALA seemed in no way prepared to step into a major public service role. Nevertheless, seeing in the war an opportunity for public service and professional-organizational maturation, Herbert Putnam, then in the middle of his forty-year tenure as Librarian of Congress, met with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker in April 1917 to suggest that the ALA might take the lead in providing and managing reading materials for American soldiers and sailors (Young 10-12).¹²² At their annual conference that June, the ALA established a War Service Committee to oversee what would be known as the Library War Service.¹²³ Putnam assumed leadership as the General Director of the LWS and quickly began to formulate a plan of attack. Operating as an affiliated agency under the aegis of the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), the LWS planned to build,

¹²² Putnam's suggestion was not without precedent, and his report to the ALA conference drew on the examples of German and British military libraries, as well as the YMCA's efforts to bring books to U.S. troops on the Mexican border (Young 11). See Koch, *Books in Camp*, for a report addressed to Putnam on the British program of collecting and distributing books to soldiers.

¹²³ Because most of the ALA's work during the war was performed under the administrative umbrella of the LWS, I will use ALA and LWS interchangeably throughout. In general, I use "LWS" when discussing the actual operations of the camp libraries and dispatch centers and "ALA" when discussing issues that affected the association's representation of libraries and librarians more generally.

stock, and manage a large library building at each of the country's 32 training camps.¹²⁴ Other camp buildings would serve as smaller branch libraries, further increasing the circulation of reading matter through camps. With its headquarters in Washington, D.C., supported by twelve other administrative branches strategically scattered throughout the states, the LWS would comprise a "National Library System" that could serve camps with "thoroughly equipped and efficiently managed public libraries like any other city of 50,000 to 100,000 population" ("History-Making" 4). To support this ambitious mission, the ALA campaigned hard for both money and books, eventually collecting over \$5,000,000 and 4.2 million gift books (Young 21-25).

From September 1917 until the dissolution of the War Service Committee in 1920, the LWS supplied reading materials to soldiers and sailors in camps, naval stations, aviation fields, ships, and hospitals across the United States and abroad (fig. 4.6). At domestic camps, the LWS operated out of specially-built library buildings, where the storage and circulation of books were supervised by professional librarians in ALA uniforms. By June 1918, there were 145 librarians and assistants working in 45 camps (most of these were men), in addition to 24 hospital

¹²⁴ The CTCA was established in April 1917 after an August 1916 report showed that U.S. army camps along the Mexican border were hotbeds of drinking, gambling, prostitution, and venereal disease. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker chose a fellow progressive-minded reformer, Raymond B. Fosdick, to chair this new commission, which set to the task of cleaning up the areas in and around the nation's camps (Bristow 5-8). The CTCA discouraged vice by enforcing the section of the Selective Service Act that banned the sale of alcohol to men in uniform and by establishing prostitution-free zones in the cities and towns surrounding camps (Keene 24-25). In addition to these more punitive measures (and an aggressive program of sexual education), the CTCA also sought to fill the long, tedious hours of inactivity that characterized a soldier's typical day with more wholesome activities, such as exercise, team sports, singing and dancing, and reading.

The ALA's own publicity materials reveal a pragmatic ambivalence to the CTCA. Early issues of the *War Library Bulletin* make a great show of the ALA's affiliation with the CTCA, reproducing letters from Chairman Fosdick (*WLB* 1.1) and Secretary Baker (*WLB* 1.2), along with endorsements from representatives of other affiliated social welfare organizations, the YMCA and the Red Cross. These items seem clearly designed to accrue a sense of legitimacy to the ALA's fledgling project. In later issues, however, the LWS appears much more autonomous, as any sense of overseeing governmental structure disappears from mention. This shift represents the changing organizational reality of the LWS, which undertook its overseas service (the focus of much of its later internal attention and outward-facing publicity) without CTCA oversight.

librarians (most of these were women) (“Personnel”).¹²⁵ The average camp library held just over 25,000 books (65% of which were fiction) and subscribed to 51 magazines; donated “Burlson magazines”¹²⁶ added to the regular subscriptions (Young 43). In larger camps, central libraries supported over 1,300 smaller “branches” located in YMCA huts, Knights of Columbus buildings, Red Cross stations, barracks, and mess halls. To support an American fighting force that drew almost a fifth of its draftees from among the foreign born, the LWS stocked books in over 40 languages, described by one ALA official as “Spanish [...] Yiddish, Polish, Lithuanian, French, Italian, German, Scandinavian, Russian, Chinese, Arabic and the other languages making up the forty different tongues in our polyglot army” (Stockbridge 8).¹²⁷ Borrowing privileges at all service points were open and free.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ This gender divide will be discussed further below.

¹²⁶ Through a special arrangement with Postmaster General Albert S. Burlson, anyone could affix a one-cent postage stamp to the cover a used magazine and send it through the U.S. Mail to a camp library (Young 43).

¹²⁷ Keene reports that “officials estimated that 18 percent of enlisted men were foreign-born and 13 percent black, although these groups only made up 14.5 percent and 10 percent of the total population respectively. Approximately 100,000 of the half million foreign-born troops serving in the military could not speak English” (20). The military attempted to “Americanize” non-English-speaking troops with special “development battalions,” but often troops self-segregated along ethnic and linguistic lines within the regular battalions (33). See Ford for a dedicated history of the experiences of foreign-born soldiers in training camps.

¹²⁸ All camp libraries followed an “open stacks” policy and circulated books for seven days on an honor system without any dues or fines (Young 44).

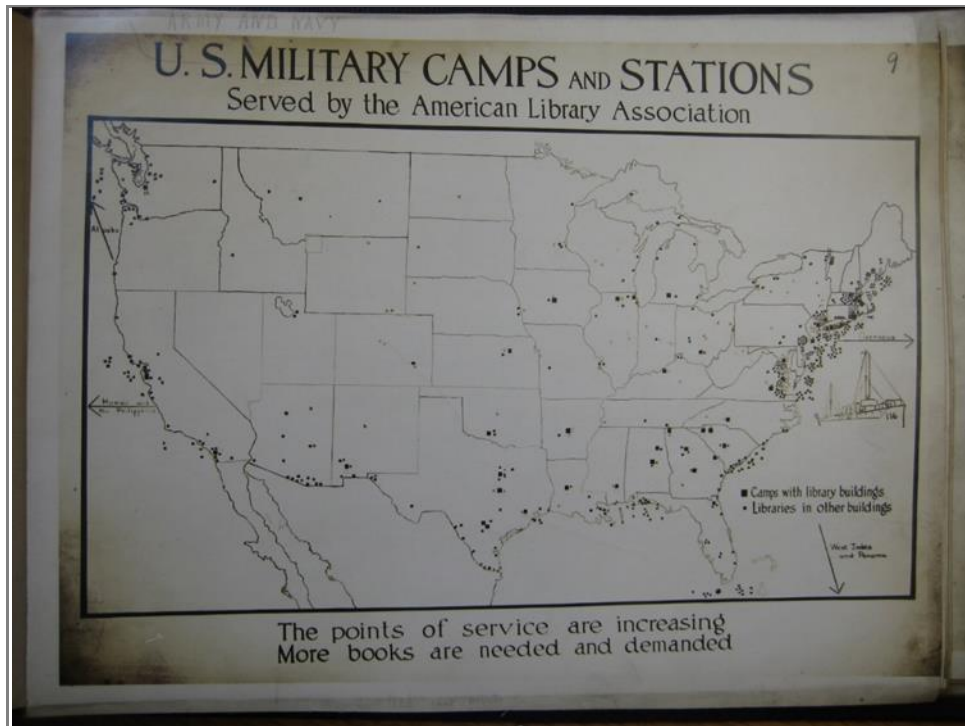


Fig. 4.6. Display map showing domestic distribution points for LWS books. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 3, Signs, Library Views and Miscellaneous Cards, ALAA.)

In the spring of 1918, the LWS followed the American Expeditionary Forces abroad and expanded its services to Europe. With a fifty-ton-per-month allotment of cargo space on military ships, the LWS shipped just over 2.5 million books and 226,000 magazines overseas (“Library War Service”).¹²⁹ This massive distribution was supported behind the scenes by sixteen regional dispatch offices, where workers sorted and processed books into specially-designed shipping boxes that, once opened, could stack into portable bookshelves (Young 31). All the while, the small staff at LWS headquarters, operating out of the basement of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., attempted to keep track of it all: circulation figures, usage patterns, requests for new titles, and anecdotes of library use. All told, the ALA oversaw the distribution and

¹²⁹ An estimated 40% of the reading material shipped to Europe was lost in transport, as boxes were misplaced or mislabeled, ships were torpedoed and sunk, and books were surreptitiously “borrowed” by soldiers and sailors without librarian supervision (Young 63).

circulation of an estimated 10 million books and magazines to the nearly 4 million U.S. soldiers who fought in World War I.

In the immediate aftermath, the official story of the Library War Service—that is, the story told by the ALA—was one of bureaucratic efficiency, logistical mastery, and triumph against long odds. In his history of the LWS, Young describes the “self-congratulatory mood” of the association’s June 1919 conference, in which over half of the papers delivered to eager audience members touched on aspects of the LWS (79). To Young and other historians looking back at this episode in the ALA’s history, this eagerness and pride betray just how much the association’s leaders had staked their hopes for the future of their profession on the risks and romance of providing library services to U.S. troops. The Library War Service came at a crucial moment in the development both of American librarianship as a profession and of the ALA as this coalescing profession’s representative organization. According to Burton E. Stevenson, a novelist and librarian involved with the LWS, the prewar ALA was “merely a humdrum professional organization wrapped round with tradition, settled in its habits of thought, and chiefly occupied with matters of technical detail” (qtd. in Young 10). This image of the ALA as a parochial group of “quiet, inoffensive, well-behaved people, cherishing the same hobby” was seen as a liability by those librarians who hoped to gain wider recognition as modern professionals in the growing knowledge-work economy (qtd. in Young 10). War provided the perfect opportunity for library leaders to remake their profession and the ALA in more modern terms.

One of the most overt benefits of war service was the potential to revise the gendering—and by extension, the perceived value—of library work. Dee Garrison has suggested that “male library leaders, already sensitive to their position within a feminized profession,” excitedly hoped

that serving a “new horde of masculine readers” during the war would, by association, “serve to increase the prestige and professional status of the librarian” (219). In addition to citing Stevenson’s unflattering description of the ALA before the war, Garrison points to a particularly revealing notice from an early issue of the *War Library Bulletin* (the LWS’s official newsletter) that lays out the stakes of war library service:

This present movement is the opportunity for which we have been waiting. It is an opportunity to demonstrate to the MEN of America—both those in military service and those in the higher circles of governmental activities—that library work is a profession; that we librarians are in this work because it offers expression to our ideals; that we are not only professional men and women, but that we are business people, who can engage in a nation-wide undertaking from a national point of view. It is an opportunity for all of us to participate in such a way that we can carry ourselves a little straighter, with the pride that comes from knowing that an increasing number of people believe in us and in our work. (“Personal Note,” capitalization in original)

The pressures to perform for the “MEN of America” suffused all aspects of LWS operations, from the militaristic air of LWS uniforms to the unofficial policy that excluded women from serving as head camp librarians.¹³⁰ On this latter issue, when some women librarians forced the question of why women in training camps could “serve tea in a [YMCA] hostess hut” but not “serve books in a library,” the ALA’s public answer (again, from the *War Library Bulletin*) shows how eager the association was to accrue some of the manliness of war service to library work:

Every person on the staff thus far has been a man who was willing and able not only to do library work, but also to handle 200-pound bags of magazines and

¹³⁰ While there was never an official ALA or War Department prohibition against women serving as camp librarians, the first woman was not given the title of “Camp Librarian” until May 1918, when Blanche Galloway was put in charge of the Pelham Bay Naval Training Station library (Young 32, 35). Some women in the profession supported the unofficial prohibition, usually by the rationale that military camps were no places for ladies. But for at least one woman librarian, Beatrice Winser, this reason was not good enough. In February 1918, Winser took her complaints over the head of Herbert Putnam and straight to the Secretary of War. That summer, she and six other women staged a protest at the ALA’s annual conference. Whether it was pressure from Winser and others, or the shift in LWS priorities that came with the Armistice, the prohibition against women in camps was eventually relaxed (Young 34-35).

large boxes of books, to shovel coal and to drive and care for an automobile. Most of these things women librarians could not do. (“Women and the Work They Do”)

This appeal to the “arduous” nature of camp library work does recognize that women are ““in it” in the aggregate far more than men,” working in dispatch centers, collecting books at their own public libraries, and even volunteering at nearby camps as librarians’ assistants. However, the authors do not mention the most visible way that women librarians served in the war: as hospital librarians.¹³¹ The omission of female librarians from both the actual work and public representations of the LWS shows how male library leaders attempted to use war service to reimagine librarianship in terms that would counter gendered anxieties and prejudices.

War service librarians also hoped to build new professional capital by serving a distinct population of library users. In the larger context of public library services, the LWS’s exclusively male, largely non-elite patron base was highly unusual—especially when paired with the ALA’s repeated claims that soldier-readers overwhelmingly favored non-fiction books. ALA officials strategically played up both the gender and genre identities of their war service patrons so that the non-fiction reading habits of soldiers became a signifier of masculinity and modernity. In an article in the internal publication *War Libraries* from September 1918, Frank Parker Stockbridge explains:

The most striking phenomenon about the United States Army and Navy is that it is a reading army as no army ever was before, and that its members are reading far less for recreation than the average citizen reads—our fiction circulation is less than 50 per cent of the total as compared with more than 70 per cent in public libraries. (“That Question Answered”)

To the audience of ALA member librarians reading this statement back home, the gendered implications of Stockbridge’s comparison would be clear. By showing how little use the “reading army” has for fiction, Stockbridge claims soldiers as both superior readers and superior men.

¹³¹ More on this particular type of library work to follow in a subsequent section.

This dual claim is made even more explicit in an earlier section of Stockbridge's column, when he writes that the "average man's book-shelves" are insufficient as sources of the up-to-date, technical books on war-related topics that soldiers predominantly require. As the managers of such library collections, librarians hoped to gain their own sense of superiority from the superior readers they claimed to serve.¹³²

As the ALA made explicit and implicit claims for how war service might remake American librarianship, the association was amplifying certain strains of thought about readers and reading already entrenched in professional discourses on the role of public libraries in the lives of their users. Broadly speaking, the years between the ALA's founding in 1876 and the start of WWI in 1916 saw a major shift in how librarians imagined their relationship to the reading public. The dominant model of nineteenth-century librarianship—a "guardians of culture" model that figured libraries as walled-off mausoleums full of old books and even older values—had lost ground to more "modern" views of libraries as more participatory, democratic spaces.¹³³ This shift in ideas about libraries required a concomitant shift in ideas about library use, particularly along the lines of class and gender. As grandiose reading rooms were nominally opened to all, a model of cultural paternalism in which the librarian knew best gradually gave way to a model that was more tolerant of the varied tastes and interests of individual readers. This new model of reader choice activated plenty of anxieties about what readers would choose to read, anxieties that found voice in late-nineteenth-century debates over whether libraries

¹³² As will be discussed below, these claims for the superiority of soldiers and sailors as readers were in service of the ALA's publicity aims rather than the truth.

¹³³ See Garrison and Augst. Additionally, Nardini traces the various metaphors that library leaders used to re-figure libraries in the public imagination. As librarians figured the library's past with negative images such as the mausoleum, the museum, or the warehouse, they figured the library's present and future in more positive images of the school, the church, the laboratory, and the public works.

should stock popular fiction.¹³⁴ Reader choice also raised fundamental questions about the role of librarians: what was left for librarians to do besides simply stamp books at a circulation desk if readers no longer required their guidance? In its most idealized incarnations, the Library War Service provided answers to both of these concerns. In response to concerns that readers may run wild through the stacks, the LWS provided the ALA with a model population of readers: soldiers whose disciplined and self-regulated tastes supposedly led them only to the best types of books. And in response to concerns that librarians may be rendered mere managers, the LWS allowed ALA members to imagine themselves tackling the logistical challenges of running an internationally coordinated network of people and books, a network in which librarians at all levels of the new LWS bureaucracy played specialized roles as expert managers of materials, people, and information.

Library leaders may have wished for the LWS to stand for a modern reimagining of their profession, but subsequent historians have shown that the ALA's war service did little to fundamentally change the day-to-day workings and reputations of American librarianship. On the topic of gender, Garrison points out that the small concessions that were eventually made to women librarians during the war did not translate to the postwar landscape. Nor did this brief period of highly-visible, hyper-masculinized library activity do anything to radically disrupt the public library, "encased in an image of genteel traditionalism, ineffectual males, and shushing spinsters," and push it in a different direction (Garrison 222-223). Similarly, the ALA's claims for the superior taste and discipline of the readers served by the LWS have been complicated by the ALA's complicity with War Department censorship orders. While library workers in camps and dispatch centers had always been given the prerogative to sift through gift books based on

¹³⁴ Garrison provides the definitive history of how the library profession dealt with "the fiction problem," emphasizing the gendered aspects of this debate (67-104).

their content and quality, censorship took official form in July 1918, when the War Department quietly asked the ALA to remove and destroy 14 pro-German and pro-pacifist titles from camp libraries (Young 53).¹³⁵ These official censorship practices in the camps were outdone by the local efforts of individual librarians across the nation, who eliminated (and, in more dramatic moments, even burned) “disloyal or seditious literature” from public library stacks (Weigand 94).¹³⁶ For Nancy K. Bristow, who discusses camp library censorship in her recent history of the Commission on Training Camp Activities, the ALA’s capitulation to the War Department’s demands is an example of the “close link between constructive and coercive work characteristic of many progressive programs”: even as progressives encouraged self-improvement and self-control, they also heavily circumscribed acceptable forms of self-expression, especially for subjects like the majority of U.S. army recruits that fell outside of the white upper-middle class (45).¹³⁷ For both Garrison and Bristow, the LWS survives as one of many Progressive Era

¹³⁵ When word of this secret plan was leaked to the press, the War Department was forced to release its full “Army Index,” a list of 80 books and pamphlets that were banned from camps. Not all librarians agreed with the ALA’s acquiescence to the War Department’s order, nor with the censorship efforts of librarians on a smaller, local level. John Cotton Dana famously refused to remove books from the Newark Public Library, a decision that brought him derision from the general public and the library profession (Capozzola 169). Nevertheless, while librarians recognized their role in promoting and safeguarding the free circulation of ideas, they were not yet professionally beholden to ideals of intellectual freedom. This obligation was not formally codified until 1939, when the ALA adopted the very first Library’s Bill of Rights, “the core statement of the profession’s commitment to intellectual freedom for the rest of the century” (Pawley, “Introduction” 13). Incidentally, the first Bill of Rights arrived on the eve of another world war that would again put these ideals to the test.

¹³⁶ Weigand chronicles the wartime history of public libraries, told not through centralized governmental or professional bodies (such as the ALA), but through a nation-wide archival dive into the operations of local libraries. In his chapter on censorship, Weigand paints a grim picture of librarians who “willingly, though quietly, participated in the campaign to rid their shelves of disloyal or seditious literature, as defined by their communities, and their local and state governments” (94-95). Even during the two-year period of U.S. neutrality, librarians had already begun suppressing pro-German and pacifist materials. For a more fine-grain and complex story of how censorship unfolded on the ground in six libraries in Iowa, see Skinner.

¹³⁷ Even without the frame of the CTCA, historians have seized on how library censorship practices, within and beyond army camps, speak to this dialectic of moral construction and moral coercion. Garrison claims wartime censorship as yet another manifestation of librarians’ allegiance to a perceived “heritage as moral guardians” (220). Public libraries had long attempted to control works of fiction; the war marked the first time that librarians set their sights on non-fiction works (221). In his brief treatment of libraries in his broader cultural history of the United States in wartime, Christopher Capozzola calls the official and unofficial censorship practices of libraries “the culmination of a culture of obligation in a moment of political crisis” (171). For Capozzola, this newly developed sense of obligation to state structures of power is best exemplified in stories of librarians who would eagerly report that even if problematic books were left on library shelves, no one would check them out anyway. “War had already

projects that, while conducted with a bang, ultimately ended in an insidious whimper—a ready emblem of the inherent contradictions and dangers of progressive political promises that conflated cultural and moral uplift with social control.

Perhaps because of these complications, and despite the scope and scale of its wartime operations, the LWS has been largely forgotten. When the ALA’s war service has been remembered at all, its recovery has tended toward one of two modes: either as a colorful detail in accounts of U.S. army life, or (in Garrison and Bristow) as a window onto darker aspects of Progressive Era ideologies and the American experience of war.¹³⁸ Most of these latter approaches attempt to assess the impact of the LWS on either the profession or the soldiers and sailors these librarians served. However, efforts to assess the ALA’s wartime activities take for granted what may be the most important aspect of the LWS. The grand adventure of providing books and magazines to America’s fighting forces gave the ALA the opportunity to circulate images and descriptions of librarians, readers, books, and reading in ways that the organization could not have previously imagined. The cultural production of the LWS and the reading practices it enabled—in the pages of newspapers and magazines, in signs in libraries at home and in camps, in pamphlets, on bookmarks, on billboards and movie screens—remains a crucial, yet untold, part of the LWS’s operational story.

Focusing on the LWS’s publicity campaigns does not obscure the ALA’s complicated investments in Progressive Era ideals of reform or wartime obligations to the state. On the

changed both librarians and readers as citizens,” Capozzola argues: in these acts of self-censoring, readers demonstrated the type of self-control that was increasingly seen as essential to democratic social stability (170).

¹³⁸ Examples of this first mode—the colorful detail—are scattered across books about American soldiers. Coffman’s classic military history of American involvement in the war includes a brief mention of the ALA’s libraries in a discussion of the Commission on Training Camp Activities (78). Corneise mentions library services in Europe as they were presented to soldiers in the AEF’s official newspaper, *The Stars and Stripes* (152). Durham uses a vignette of soldiers reading in a camp library to introduce his related topic, the “Liberty Theatres” that were set up in camps to entertain the troops (11). Finally, while Keene has a brief discussion of how intelligence and literacy testing shaped troop conscription efforts, she does not mention the ALA’s libraries at all.

contrary, “publicity” itself is a central tenet of both Progressivism and the American experience of World War I, one with serious implications for how the period thought about political subjectivity. As historian David Kennedy explains, “For progressive reformers particularly, faith in publicity as the chief instrument of reform was axiomatic”:

Publicity could tame the trusts and extinguish corruption; it could settle strikes and pass legislation; it could clean up the slums and end ‘white slavery.’ These were comforting beliefs in a society wracked by new social ills but reluctant to repudiate the laissez-faire, anti-statist heritage that Americans prized. (47)

For settlement house workers and muckrakers alike, publicity—newly enabled by expanding networks of literacy and print culture and developing notions of the psychology of suggestion—was a way to get individuals to do for themselves and others what they may be reluctant to let the state do for them. As the United States transitioned from neutrality to active involvement in the war, the state itself found a use for publicity in “the deliberate mobilization of emotions and ideas” (Kennedy 46). When President Woodrow Wilson appointed the progressive journalist George Creel to head the Committee for Public Information (CPI), he ensured that the war effort would be as much about manufacturing public opinion as it was about manufacturing ships and guns. With his own army of writers, artists, film makers, photographers, and spokesmen, Creel and his committee circulated messages of American might and morality throughout the country and beyond, a project Creel would famously describe as “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising” (4).¹³⁹ The publicity that Creel produced not only aligned the war effort with progressive-sounding aims—e.g., “a war to end all wars,” “making the world safe for democracy”—but also entailed a progressive-minded conceptualization of the individual’s

¹³⁹ Ever in control of his messaging, Creel also wrote the first history of the CPI in a 1920 book called *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee of Public Information that Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe*. Since Creel’s self-congratulatory history, others have offered more revisionist takes on the CPI and the awesome influence it wielded over the American homefront during the war years (see Kennedy; Capozzola; Kingsbury).

relationship to the social whole. Christopher Capozzola offers a startling description of this “culture of obligation” that emerged during the war, focusing on perhaps the most famous of these wartime publicity images—James Montgomery Flagg’s scowling Uncle Sam pointedly declaring “I Want YOU”—as an emblem of the changing relationship between the individual and the state that wartime publicity helped effect (4). Of course, the state did not have a monopoly on publicity, and social welfare organizations (many of them deeply entrenched in progressive ideologies) also used increasingly sophisticated mass-mediated publicity methods to compel the American homefront to sacrifice sons, buy bonds, rescue refugees, save food, roll bandages, knit socks—and give books.¹⁴⁰ Restoring the American Library Association’s contributions to this rich wartime publicity context allows us to consider the “emotions and ideas”—about books, reading, libraries, and citizenship—that librarians hoped to mobilize. In the bigger picture, focusing on LWS publicity sets into relief the ways in which “reading”—so often thought of as a self-evidently worthwhile practice—is in fact *always* being publicized and sold.

“Incidents illustrative of the appreciation of books”

As is the case with most of the operational details of the Library War Service, the organization’s approach to publicity was not invented whole-cloth in April 1917. On the contrary, the ALA’s publicity strategies built on ideas about and methods of library publicity that had been circulating in the professional discourse since at least the 1890s. Arthur Young’s claim that library publicity was “used sparingly before the war because of its tainted association with the business world” ignores a demonstrable interest among turn-of-the-century librarians in modern publicity methods (94). After the “ALA Library Primer” (1896) advised librarians to “keep the movement well before the public” (5), librarians eagerly shared ideas for publicity in

¹⁴⁰ One historian estimates that “America printed more than twenty million copies of perhaps twenty-five hundred posters in support of the war effort, more posters than all the other belligerents combined” (Rawls 12).

the pages of professional journals such as *Public Libraries* and *Library Journal* (Kleindl 65). John Cotton Dana offers perhaps the best summary statement of the library profession's thinking on publicity when he writes in 1910, "Nothing is better for a public institution than publicity" (251). As Dana's emphasis on "public" suggests, many librarians considered publicity an ethical practice: public libraries were, the thinking went, public resources, funded from the public coffers in support of the public good.¹⁴¹ The public thus had a right to know what was going on with its library, and librarians found again and again that local newspapers would print library news.¹⁴² "As a rule," Jeannette Drake wrote in 1910 of library news, "it is interesting reading which they [local editors] are glad to add to their paper" (12).¹⁴³ Beyond these more idealistic or civic-minded reasons for publicity, however, librarians also realized that publicity had practical value in increasing and diversifying library use. To this end, much of the writing on library publicity before and after the war focuses on ways in which libraries might draw in new types of users. "How few people in a community really know all the resources of the modern public library?" Winifred Ticer wrote in her 1921 treatise, *Advertising the Public Library*; "The average man will tell you it is a place for the school children and the club women" (3). Properly calibrated and disseminated publicity had the potential to correct this misunderstanding and underutilization of the public library by showing how all residents of a city—from the working classes to businessmen—might make use of the library's resources.¹⁴⁴ So while Young may be

¹⁴¹ Celia A. Hayward, writing in 1909, elaborates on the public utility metaphor by describing the library as the "intellectual power house" of a city that "must string its wires to all accessible places, and so transmit its influence" (7). The "wires" that enable the transmission of people and ideas to and from the library are newspaper ads and feature stories that highlight and encourage library usage. Purd Wright, in "Some Methods of Library Advertising" (1906), takes this sentiment even further when he calls library users "owners" (86).

¹⁴² Per Dana: "about the management of a public library there should not be, toward the public, the slightest intimation of a desire for secrecy" (251).

¹⁴³ Wright holds up the *Boston Transcript* as a "present day model" of a paper with its own "library department," which was charged exclusively with covering library news (87).

¹⁴⁴ Almost all of the early tracts on library publicity mention "workers" and "business men" as particularly desirable demographics to have making regular use of the library. Strategies for encouraging their patronage included publicizing the library's collection of business and trade materials, setting up specialized branches in business

correct in noting that the ALA itself may not have had the resources or interest to mount national library publicity campaigns before the war, local librarians had long recognized the need to “keep the movement well before the public” in a host of creative ways, all of which were calculated to sell reading—and library use more generally—to the larger community.

Prewar examples of local library publicity efforts are helpful antecedents to the ALA’s wartime campaigns, as they demonstrate how librarians had long recognized the need to control the discourse around libraries, books, and reading. Rather than assume that the public could recognize the self-evident good of libraries and reading, librarians instead learned to think of their services as any other public utility, one that needed to justify its value and public support by making targeted appeals to specific audiences. Looking to prewar publicity also helps clarify and explain the ALA’s specific strategies and methods during the war, namely the association’s reliance on local librarians and on newspaper publicity. The ALA conducted two financial drives and three book campaigns,¹⁴⁵ but to speak of the ALA’s publicity machinery as a nation-wide project under centralized control would be a vast oversimplification. While the initial July 1917 iteration of the ALA’s War Services Committee did have a publicity subcommittee, the group was dissolved only months later as the organization streamlined its operations. And while the

districts (Dana 259), and prominently displaying the library’s phone number in all newspaper ads (Drake 5; Ticer 7). This final idea, meant to extend the usefulness of the library beyond the physical circulation of books, shows how librarians were eager to advertise *themselves* as well as their libraries: as expert information workers, librarians could answer any question posed to them over the phone quickly and efficiently.

¹⁴⁵ The ALA conducted two separate financial campaigns, in September 1917 and November 1918. The first fundraiser aimed to collect \$1.5 million for ALA work alone. By April 1918, the campaign had netted \$1.7 million. The second campaign was conducted jointly with six other service organizations (YMCA, YWCA, Knights of Columbus, Jewish Welfare Board, Salvation Army, and War Camp Community Service) under the name of the United War Work (UWW) campaign. The goal for the UWW campaign was \$170 million, with the ALA expecting \$3.5 million of that total. The campaign exceeded its goal by \$35 million, giving the ALA \$3.8 million in the end. As Young points out, without this second injection of cash, the LWS would have been shuttered by the end of 1918. Books were solicited in separate campaigns, conducted in September 1917, March 1918, and January 1919. See Young 21-25 for more information, including the political backstory behind the ALA’s eventual decision to join a federated financial campaign with other service organizations.

LWS did hire two non-librarian publicity specialists to help with major appeals,¹⁴⁶ the bulk of the job of publicizing the LWS fell overwhelmingly to the ALA's member librarians, whose efforts took place on a scale well below the national level. This strategy of leaving on-the-ground publicity efforts largely to local librarians was described by one internal LWS memo as "lay-publicity" ("Notes").

Implicitly contrasted with both the more expensive option of hiring professional publicity men and the more crassly commercial option of advertising,¹⁴⁷ "lay-publicity" asked librarians to mobilize existing social and print networks in their communities to generate awareness for the LWS. In terms that echoed prewar library publicity's interest in local library news, Herbert Putnam clarified the advantages of locally-directed publicity efforts in a letter to librarians ahead of the March 1918 book campaign:

The surest way to obtain newspaper publicity is to do or have done something which the newspapers will be compelled to print as a matter of local news. The city editor may throw into the waste basket a story emanating from Washington, because nobody in his own town is concerned in it, but if it is a matter in which a local citizen is concerned, he will print it. And of course, the more prominent the citizen, the more space he will command. ("Some Suggestions about Publicity," emph. in orig.)¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ John K. Allen, a Boston journalist and chairman of the Publicity Committee of the Liberty Loan Committee of New England, was hired to help coordinate the ALA's March 1918 book campaign. The War Service Committee report from June 1918 identifies him as the only "professional aid" employed for publicity work (25). This was the case until Frank Parker Stockbridge was brought on as Direct of Information in the latter half of 1918. Stockbridge was the editor of the *New York Evening Mail* and *Popular Mechanics*, making him one of many print media professionals who found work as publicists for wartime causes (most notable among them George Creel). Stockbridge was also on the national publicity committee for the Nov. 1918 UWW campaign (Young 23).

¹⁴⁷ There is a long tradition of publishers and booksellers struggling with the commercialist implications of advertising books, a tradition that gets upended in the 1910s and 1920s. See Garvey on the development of late-nineteenth-century book advertising and Radway on the apotheosis of early-twentieth-century book marketing, the *Book of the Month Club*.

¹⁴⁸ The emphasis on "prominent" citizens dovetails with other publicity strategy documents that coach librarians in mobilizing existing local networks—particularly networks of women—for LWS work. Ahead of the September 1917 Million Dollar Fund campaign, a notice in the *War Library Bulletin* outlined a pseudo-pyramid scheme in which "key men and women" in local communities would be used to recruit others to subscribe to the campaign ("History-Making" 5). Church and club women are explicitly targeted as potentially rich points of connectivity within local communities. Strategy memos for the March 1918 book campaign place a similar emphasis on local networks, identifying women's clubs, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, the Junior Red Cross, and grammar schools as sites for easy publicity ("Organization" 4). Getting children involved was, in the eyes of LWS Headquarters, a surefire way of getting a local newspaper's attention. As one strategy memo notes, "most parents

By exploiting the fact that, while advertising cost money, generating news was free, local librarians found creative ways to turn the nation-wide call for books and funds into local, print-worthy news. The dramatic display on the steps of the NYPL with which this chapter opened was only one of these local efforts; similar scenes, if on a slightly smaller scale, took place across the country. In Detroit, librarians pitched an army tent under the soaring ceilings of the library's majestic reading room and asked patrons to fill it with books for the troops (fig. 4.7). In Chapel Hill, librarians filled a glass case with books in front of the circulation desk and offered a prize to patrons who could guess how many donated books were in the growing pile (fig. 4.8). By encouraging these types of local publicity activities—and by trusting that local newspapers would amplify their messages—Herbert Putnam could proudly report in the War Service Committee's June 1918 annual report, "There has been no outlay whatever for paid advertisement" (25).¹⁴⁹

like to see their children's name in print—a fact of which every city editor is fully aware." The memo goes on to encourage librarians first to "enlist the services of as many children as possible," then "send their names to the paper" ("Some Suggestions," emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁹ The boast was not only a financial one: avoiding the crass commercialism of paying for advertising allowed the ALA to maintain an air of cultural superiority. That said, librarians were encouraged to find local businessmen who would donate their ad buys in papers to the LWS. Issue 5 of the *WLB* contains sample "Display Advertising" that could fill these donated spaces.

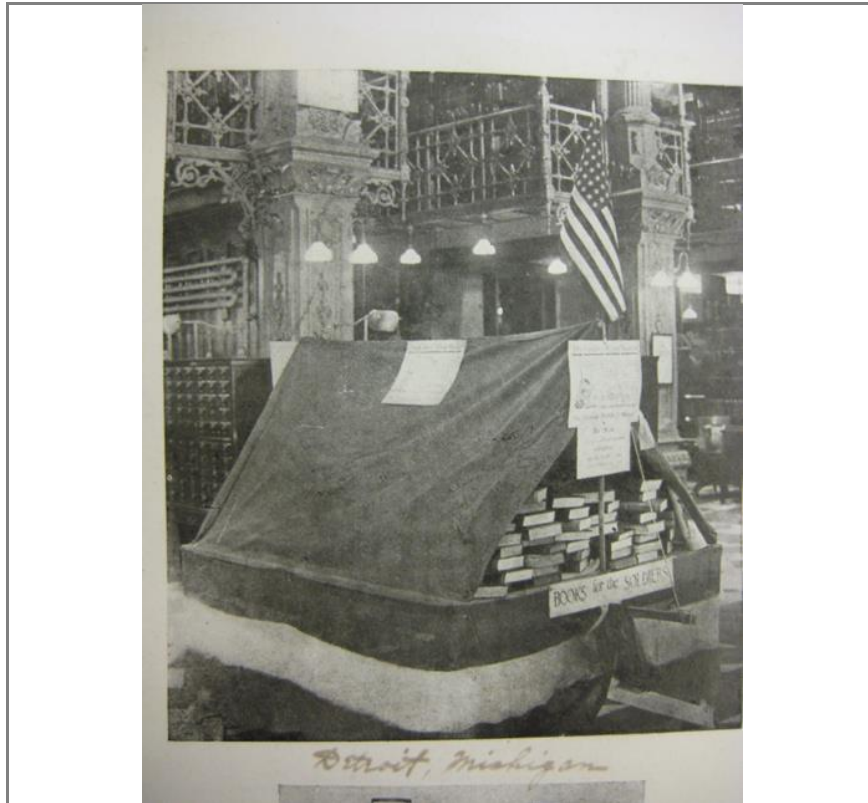


Fig. 4.7. Tent collecting books for soldiers in the reading room of the Detroit Public Library. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, Prints: Key to Electro-Type Plates and Zinc Etchings, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.8. Guessing contest in Chapel Hill, NC. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

While Putnam's boast may be technically true, the ALA did still spend plenty of money on its financial and book campaigns. The same 1918 report indicates that the Book Campaign cost the association nearly \$25,000, the bulk of which was spent on producing, printing, and distributing a standardized set of publicity materials. The next big campaign—the United War Work Campaign of November 1918—saw the ALA spend nearly \$27,000 on printing and advertising (*Report...1919* 15). The posters, pamphlets, book lists, and bookmarks covered by these costs gave the campaign a veneer of national cohesion, even as local librarians modified centrally-produced materials or simply made their own (fig. 4.9). Additionally, and more substantively, these centrally produced and distributed publicity materials focus on what local librarians may not have had access to: the soldiers and sailors using camp, trench, and hospital libraries. Throughout the war, LWS officials asked camp librarians to provide both photographs and anecdotes that could be used for publicity.¹⁵⁰ A December 1917 memo identifies the faith that LWS officials had in these anecdotes: “Incidents illustrative of the appreciation of the books will inspire others to give.” To disseminate these anecdotes, LWS Headquarters not only used the *War Library Bulletin* to communicate to librarians, but also developed specially produced press releases for direct distribution to newspapers and magazines. Under headlines such as “NEWS from LIBRARY WAR SERVICE” or “Good Stories from Camp and Trench,” these press releases mimicked the look and feel of a newspaper page as they addressed themselves “To the Editor” (fig. 4.10). All told, the LWS issued at least five press clipping sheets directly to newspapers and magazines, in addition to the anecdotes that trickled down to librarians through the *War Library Bulletin* and, in late 1918, four issues of a special newsletter called *War*

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, a letter to camp librarians asking for “anything and everything that may have news value or be of ‘human interest,’ including quotations from soldiers and YMCA secretaries about the Camp Library Service” (Putnam to Camp Librarians, 12 Jan 1918).

Libraries. Pamphlets to be distributed at local libraries make up the rest of the centrally produced and distributed LWS materials. On the whole, then, the ALA's wartime strategy of "lay-publicity" relied on collecting local stories—from home, from camp, and abroad—and redistributing them through both local and national networks of newspaper and magazine print.

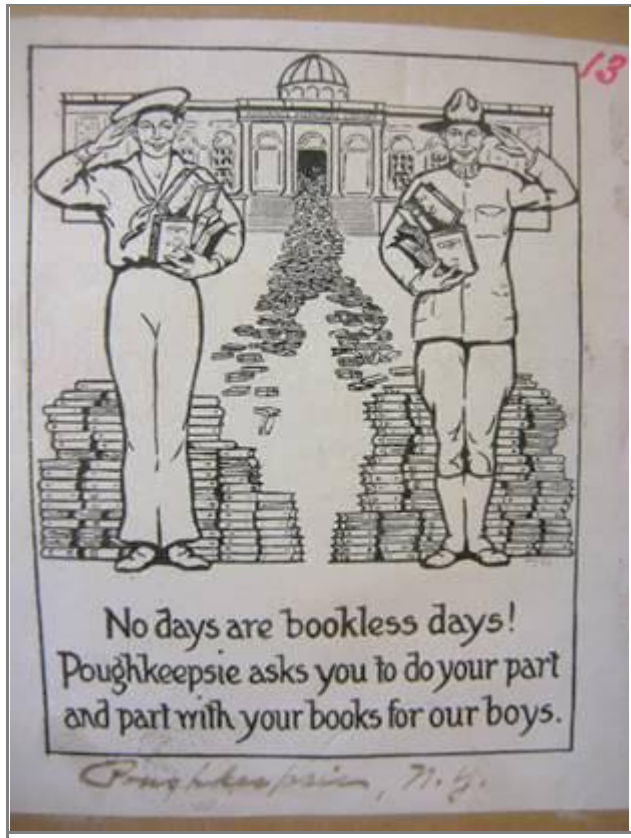


Fig. 4.9. Sign from Poughkeepsie, NY, book campaign. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, Prints: Key to Electro-Type Plates and Zinc Etchings, ALAA.)

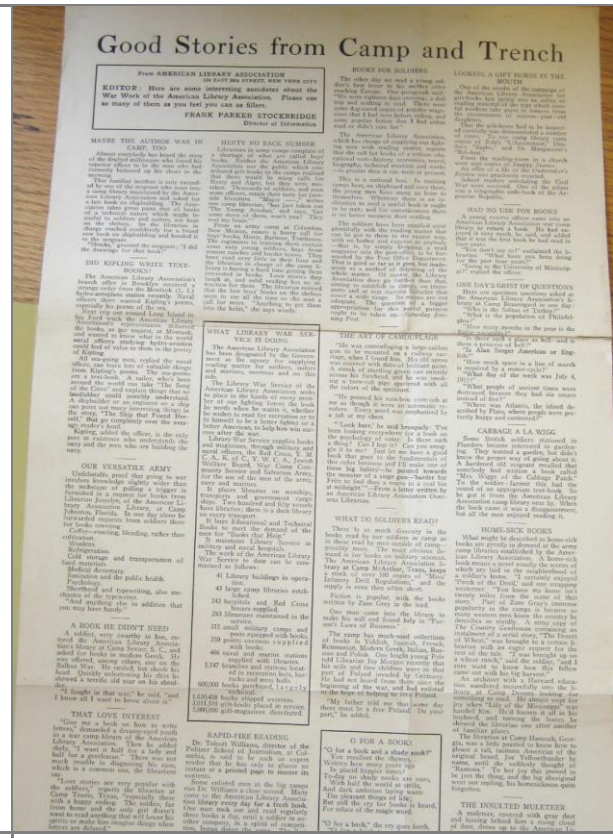


Fig. 4.10. "Good Stories from Camp and Trench" press release clipping sheet. (Publicity Releases, 1917-1919, RS 89/1/61, Box 1, Publicity, Volume I, 1917-1919, ALAA.)

The remainder of this chapter will turn to these materials themselves, but it is worth pausing for a moment longer to consider how central the newspaper was to the ALA's publicity strategy. In a broader sense, a reliance on mass-mediated print was a common feature of the Progressive Era's general faith in publicity as an instrument of social change.¹⁵¹ For librarians

¹⁵¹ Kennedy connects the CPI's use of mass media techniques in disseminating war propaganda to "peacetime mass-circulation journalism," especially muckraking and sensationalism (59).

specifically, however, newspaper publicity seemed particularly suited to their cause: after all, newspapers were a readerly medium. At an ALA conference in 1906, Purd B. Wright explained, “More people of the reading class may be reached in a shorter time and at less expense through the medium of the newspaper than any other” (86); John Cotton Dana elaborated this same sentiment in 1910 when he prophetically announced, “The value of the newspapers in extending the use and usefulness and the influence of public libraries is as yet not half realized by librarians” (277).¹⁵² For Wright, Dana, and others, the newspaper was an invaluable link to the audience that librarians saw as their biggest potential supporters: people who regularly read and therefore were more likely to identify with the library’s mission. The ALA’s wartime publicity materials continued to mine this traditional vein of library support—and did so by using largely traditional methods. Just as prewar library publicity relished the “human interest story” that helped make the mass-mediated space of the newspaper or magazine paradoxically intimate, the ALA’s wartime publicity likewise turned to descriptive anecdotes to show how the experience of being a soldier could be uniquely mediated through individualized and communal encounters with text. In these readerly forms of publicity, the ALA used carefully selected anecdotes to construct the figure of the “soldier-reader,” a unique type of reader onto whom the association mapped a series of hopes and expectations about reading.

Particularly in the centrally-produced, nationally-circulated press releases issued from LWS headquarters to newspaper and magazine editors, anecdotes that captured “incidents illustrative of the appreciation of books” allowed the ALA to circulate richly textured images of

¹⁵² Interestingly, Dana contrasted newspaper publicity with poster publicity: “The value of posters is apt to be over-estimated. They are expensive; to put them up in proper places is difficult and takes a good deal of time; and they are read by few. A few lines in a newspaper, printed in a few successive issues if need be, will far outweigh in influence the work of many expensive and widely displayed posters” (256). Given the later association of posters with wartime propaganda in general, the ALA’s trust in newspaper and magazine print is a helpful reminder that most wartime messaging circulated in far less spectacular forms.

soldiers and sailors as readers—readers through whom the ALA publicized not only its war library service, but also specific ideas about libraries, reading, and books. To appreciate the effects of the anecdote strategy, we need only consider its opposite, publicity based not on the gritty details that show how books and reading really function in camp, trench, and hospital, but rather on more abstract appeals to what one *War Library Bulletin* article generalizes as “the humanizing, helpful effects of good reading” (“More Books Needed”). In fact, before the camp libraries were fully up and running (i.e., before there were anecdotes to collect), some ALA materials meant to drum up public support did indeed contain more of these idealistic appeals. A feature in the first issue of the *WLB* refers abstractly to the “intellectual and moral stimulus” that books and reading might provide (“Books for the Camps” 6). Another appeal, set in a small text box on a page of the September 1917 issue of the *WLB*, makes a similarly vague appeal:

An army fighting for American ideals must be kept in touch with those ideals. They must have the literature of their country to keep the ideals of their country before them. This war is a war of principle. Keep the soldiers in touch with the ideals on which that principle is founded. Give them libraries.

This type of vague appeal—to “a war of principle” fought by soldiers “in touch with the ideals on which that principle is founded”—disappears from later publicity materials. Instead, library publicity materials go to great pains to eschew such generalities and convey specific, detailed accounts of how soldiers actually *use* the books and library spaces provided by the LWS. These details are not gruesome or sensationalized, as in many other forms of wartime publicity that relied on images of atrocities to generate concern.¹⁵³ Instead, the details of soldiers’ reading

¹⁵³ Rozario makes a forceful argument for the collusion of sensationalism and humanitarianism in his reading of WWI-era American Red Cross appeals. He argues that the Red Cross’s use of sensational details of suffering stems from the assimilation of techniques from “the pulp magazines, advertisements, and commercial movies of an increasingly entertainment-oriented mass culture” into charitable appeals (419). Kingsbury touches on many similar themes in her treatment of wartime propaganda aimed specifically at homefront audiences. She argues that the militarization of innocent figures like women and children is a crucial function of American WWI propaganda, and stories and images of atrocity are central to this process (9-10).

practices evince an almost calculated mundaneness. This commitment to the un-sensational detail—even when individual details complicate or even upend a more cohesive overall message—is itself a commitment to an abstract, high-minded idea about reading: namely, an endorsement of a vision of reading that valorizes individual choice and experience over blind obedience to external concepts like taste, culture, and genre. The role that choice plays in soldiers’ reading practices thus becomes the basis for most LWS appeals, as it supports both the immediate work of the LWS and the more general vision of reading that LWS appeals help propagate and champion.

Weaponized Reading

Three major uses for soldier books and libraries dominate the Library War Service’s anecdotal publicity appeals: reading for education, reading for recreation, and reading for recuperation. As the next three sections illustrate, the lines between these uses are not always solid; nevertheless, these broad categories of use for books and reading help the ALA organize the experience of the soldier-reader in a way that repeatedly underscores how soldiers choose to read. Of these categories, the most common—or at least most publicized—is reading for education. In materials intended for both general audiences and soldiers themselves, librarians were eager to claim that the American soldier “reads to learn even more than he reads for recreation,” and furthermore, that his purposive, educational reading is a crucial component of the war effort (*SSB* 9). The 1918 publicity pamphlet *Soldiers, Sailors, and Books* provides the most sustained treatment of the student-soldier, as it describes how each training camp is “not essentially different from a big university,” in the words of Chairman of the Commission on Training Camp Activities Raymond Fosdick (4). “All must study,” the authors of this pamphlet claim—not just the Quartermasters, aviators, engineers, and artilleryists, but even the “cooks and

bakers, carpenters, horseshoers, wheelwrights” (SSB 4). Press releases containing camp life anecdotes further flesh out this vision of a reading army by showing the wide variety of books that supported soldiers and sailors as students of all aspects of modern warfare. One short blurb in a press release offers this list of subjects requested from a camp library in a single day:

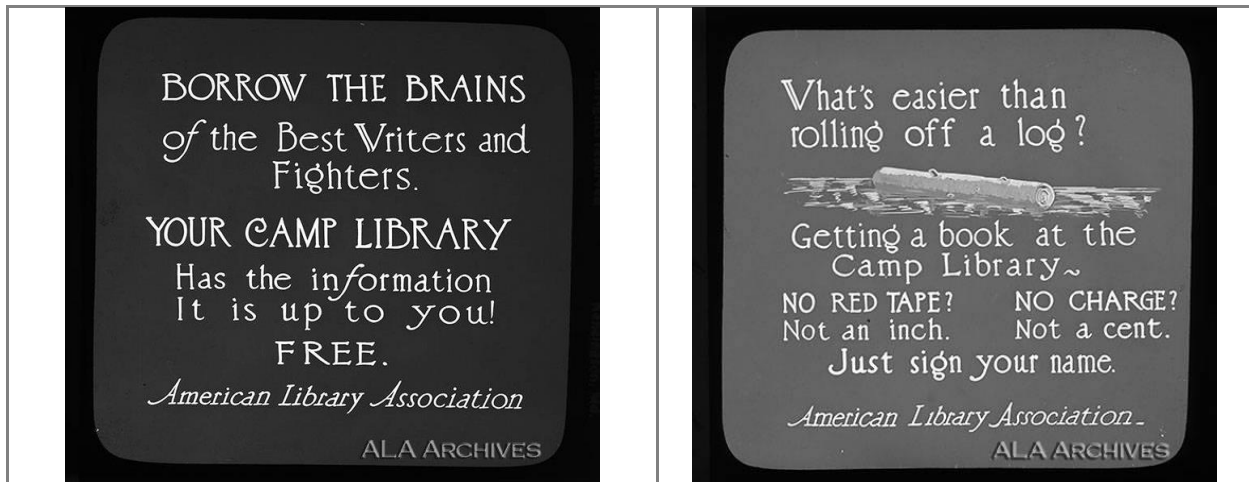
Coffee—roasting, blending, rather than cultivation.
Woolens.
Refrigeration.
Cold storage and transportation of food materials.
Medical dictionary.
Sanitation and the public health.
Psychology.
Shorthand and typewriting, also mechanics of the typewriter. (“Good Stories”)

In another, a soldier seeking promotion to the rank of Sergeant, First Class, testifies to studying for his exams with camp library books on the following subjects: “Army Paperwork, Nomenclature of Aeronautics, Photography, Internal Combustion Engines, Magnetos, Electricity, and Visual Signalling, together with Infantry Drill” (SSB 13). Still another oft-repeated anecdote¹⁵⁴ tells of a soldier in the camouflage corps who, when charged with the task of painting a siege gun, asked the camp librarian for a book on the psychology of color (“Good Stories”). With images of gunners and galley men reading on technical subjects, the ALA claimed that no job in the army or navy was too basic to be without a technical literature.¹⁵⁵ By extension, technical books and reading practices become essential technologies of modern warfare, as purposive, educational reading plays a central role in converting conscripted civilians into effective and efficient modern soldiers.

¹⁵⁴ This same anecdote appears in *Soldiers, Sailors, and Books*, in the Sept 19, 1918, issue of the internal newsletter *War Libraries*, and in Theodore Koch’s *Books in the War*.

¹⁵⁵ The ALA did not expect that the general public would donate technical books directly; rather, the association used funds raised from direct campaigns and from the sale of unwanted gift books to purchase most of the technical books placed in circulation in camp libraries. By June 1919, the ALA had purchased over 2,000,000 books to augment its store of donated books (*Report...1919* 33).

As publicity materials intended for a general audience showed soldiers reading to prepare for military service, a related set of materials aggressively advertised this type of reading to the soldiers themselves. Within the training camps, LWS officials used a battery of mixed media materials that emphasized the instrumental value of books and reading, of “borrow[ing] the brains of the best writers and fighters,” as one sign put it, to serve the soldier’s, the army’s, and the country’s aims (figs. 4.11, 4.12). A poster by the well-known illustrator C.B. Falls provides the most arresting example of this type of appeal to the military value of reading directed at soldiers in camps (fig. 4.13). In the poster’s central figure of a reading soldier, the artist mingles the leisure of reading with the exigencies of war: the soldier sits casually, seemingly engrossed in a book, but he nevertheless wears the full trappings of his martial uniform. In this particular image of reading, the soldier’s book becomes another component of his uniform, as specialized a fighting tool as his hat, boots, and menacing sword. Any leisure in his pose is further undercut by the imperative below the image: “Read to Win the War.” The causal relationship between reading and winning seems purely instrumental—the library’s “popular books for fighting men” can explain the technical aspects of the soldier’s job—but this claim has moralistic undercurrents as well. As with the numerous photographic images that the LWS circulated of groups of real soldiers quietly selecting and studying their books (figs. 4.14, 4.15), Falls’s poster reminds the viewer that a reading soldier is a good soldier, one who can fit quietly into the regimented structures of military life. The discipline embodied by the figure of the reading soldier is thus as important as the technical knowledge he may be gleaning from the book in his hands.



Figs. 4.11 and 4.12. Lantern slides for use in training camp theaters. (War Service Photographs and Slides, 1917-1920. American Library Association Archives Digital Collections.)

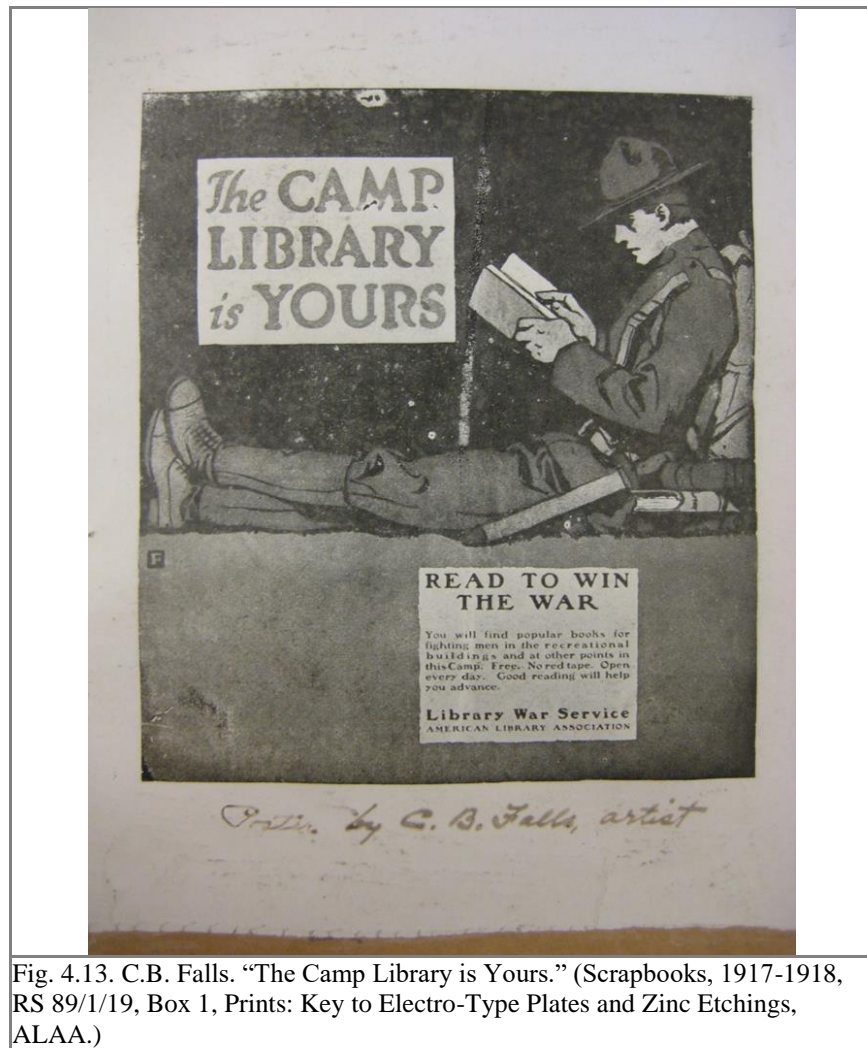


Fig. 4.13. C.B. Falls. "The Camp Library is Yours." (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, Prints: Key to Electro-Type Plates and Zinc Etchings, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.14. Soldiers browsing for books in a camp library. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.15. "St. Louis libr.—Soldiers in Armory, reading library books." (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918. RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

While LWS publicity materials were particularly emphatic about how soldiers could use reading and books to become better soldiers, these materials also emphasized the value of self-directed educational reading for soldiers after the war. The same *Soldiers, Sailors, and Books* pamphlet mentioned above has a section called “Reading for the Future” that shows how soldiers use reading for military and civilian service. “Libraries are teaching men to fight,” the authors claim, “and they are teaching them to live better lives when fighting shall cease” (15). Colorful evidence for the second part of this claim is again provided in camp life anecdotes in press releases. In addition to lists of military-technical subjects, press releases also publicized the topics soldiers turned to when they imagined a life after war. If the psychology of color and the chemistry of high explosives were specific wartime topics, then peacetime topics included “Salesmanship, bee-culture, engineering, landscape gardening, boxing, educational methods, watchmaking” (“More News”). In other press materials, soldiers are shown using camp libraries and books to keep track of their civilian occupations while they are away at war. As one soldier who reportedly asks for books on accounting puts it, “If I come back when we get through with this war, I don’t want to start in all over again. I want to try to keep up with my line while I am working for Uncle Sam” (*SSB* 17). For some soldiers, books are instrumental in helping them prepare for vastly different lives after the war, as in a lengthy story of a librarian on a transport ship who uses a textbook on business correspondence to help a soldier who has lost his right hand learn how to write again with his left (“More Stories”). Whether soldiers are reading to keep up with their old occupations or reading to discover or recreate for themselves new lines of work, the camp library is shown to provide the necessary resources for all types of self-directed educational reading.

By the end of the war, as with publicity materials targeted at a general audience back home, the LWS's appeals to soldiers at camps likewise shifted in tone, focusing more on the role that books and libraries might play in helping the soldier find his "job back home" (fig. 4.16).¹⁵⁶ A series of bookmarks distributed in camp and hospital libraries, for example, gave eager soldiers reading lists for a number of different occupations, ranging from Toolmaking to Foreign Trade (fig. 4.17). Black-and-white lantern slides for use in camp movie theaters communicated in more direct terms. "DON'T LOAF," one screams, "The other fellow is studying." "GOT YOUR EYES GLUED to some job back home?" asks another before warning, "Better glue them to the book about it."¹⁵⁷ As these last two examples suggest, publicity materials designed explicitly for soldiers' eyes often reflected the anxieties that came with conscripted military service. As the ALA attempted to convince soldiers that books, reading, and libraries could help them transition back to civilian life, the association's publicity materials often appealed to a longing for a pre-war social order, particularly around the issue of jobs taken up by women in the absence of men back home (fig. 4.18). Unsurprisingly, most of these materials show larger-than-life men at work, far from the library that ostensibly enabled their hyper-masculinized labors (fig. 4.19). (In fact, C.B. Falls's reading soldier is rare in that he is actually depicted with book in hand.) These outsized depictions of the best-case results of self-directed, educational reading are the culmination of a concerted effort to publicize purposive non-fiction reading as a crucial practice of masculinity. The camp library provides the physical space and resources for this reading practice that pays dividends (both material and symbolic) in war and in peace.

¹⁵⁶ This strain of messaging was part of a larger post-war publicity campaign in which the ALA tried to marshal its newfound name recognition into a more general campaign for library use and reading (Young 81-82).

¹⁵⁷ These lantern slides were most likely used in the "liberty theatres" that were established in most of the major camps. Slides were also produced for theaters with civilian audiences, as Rozario describes in the context of the Red Cross's campaigns. See Collins or Durham for more information on how film was made for and used in WWI training camps.

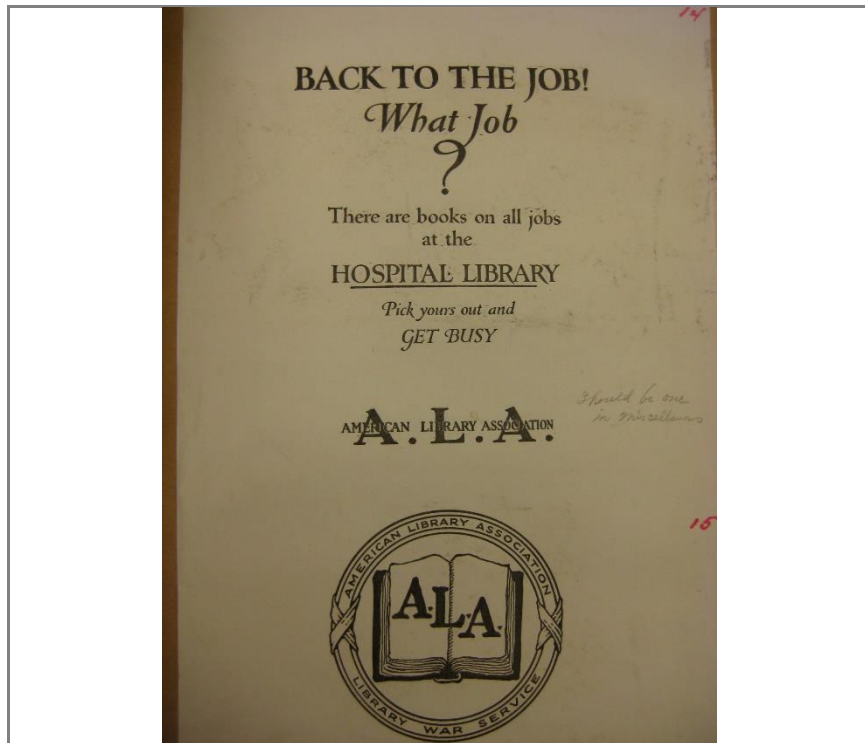


Fig. 4.16. Sign for use in camp hospital libraries. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, Prints: Key to Electro-Type Plates and Zinc Etchings, ALAA.)



Fig. 4.17. Bookmarks publicizing books on jobs for soldiers. (Booklists, 1917-1920, RS 89/1/65, Series 7, Volume 9, Vocational Bookmark Lists, 1919, ALAA.)

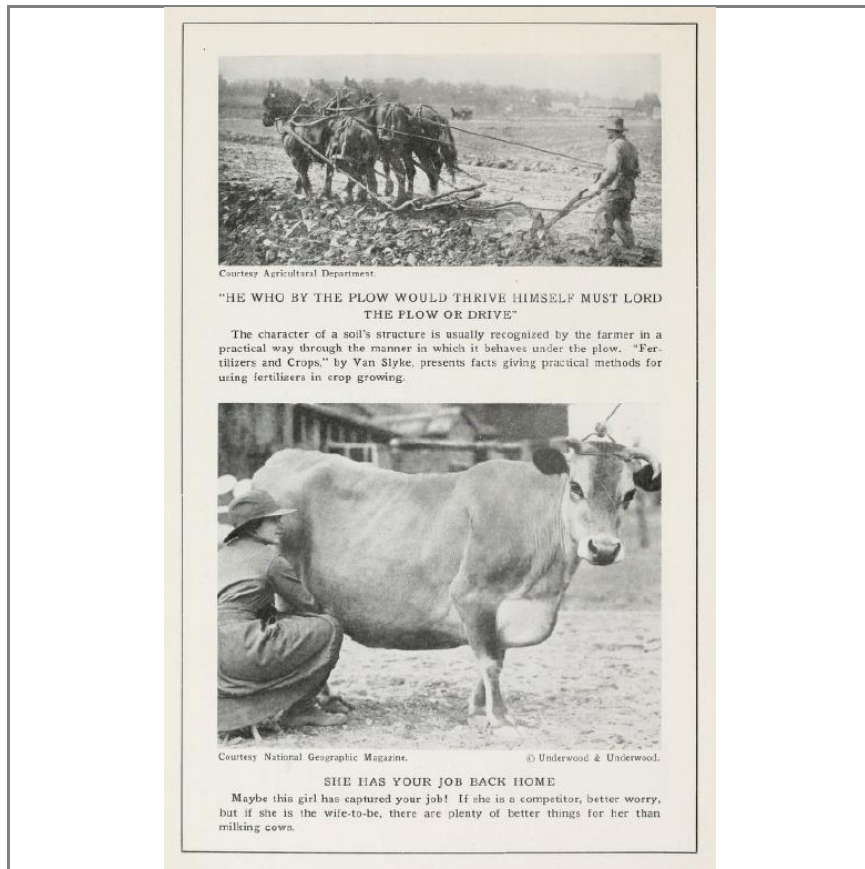


Fig. 4.18. "She has your job back home" (14), from *Your Job Back Home: A Book for Men Leaving the Service* (1919). Courtesy of HathiTrust.

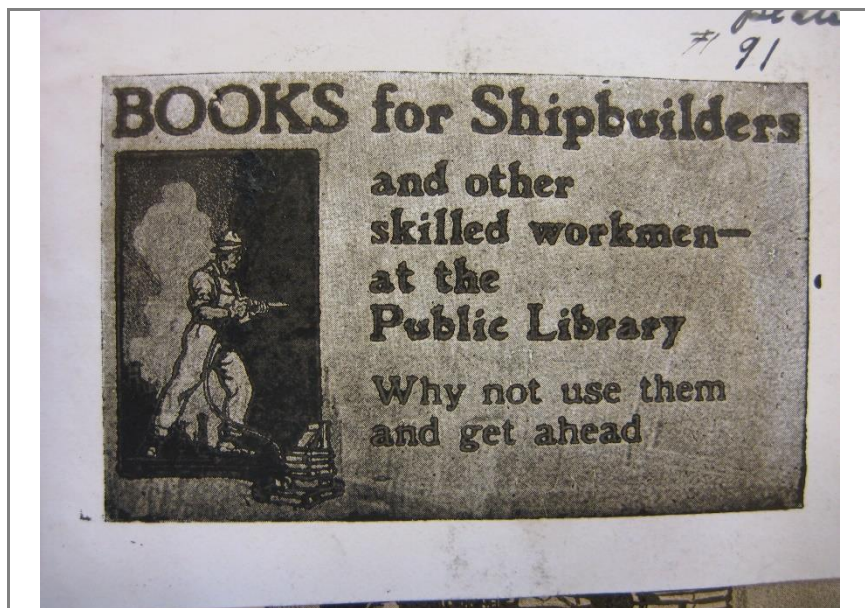


Fig. 4.19. Image of shipbuilder used in vocational materials. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, Prints: Key to Electro-Type Plates and Zinc Etchings, ALAA.)

A final type of educational reading occupies a much more ambivalent space in the LWS publicity materials: literacy education. Librarians and the public at large may have liked to imagine a fighting force whose expertise was enabled by its literacy and access to books, but the fact remained that around 21.5% of white recruits and 50.6% of black recruits were deemed illiterate by army officials (Keene 28). LWS materials, perhaps unsurprisingly, do not extensively campaign on this issue. Some LWS materials—particularly those directed toward soldiers themselves—do reflect this reality in oblique ways. Many of the lantern-slides mentioned above, for example, offer simple explanations of the very basics of library service, with messages about open access, ease of use, and free-of-charge borrowing policies. These materials not only publicized camp libraries as spaces of relative freedom within the “red tape” world of the military camp, but also introduced the concept of libraries to the many recruits from portions of the country that did not have widespread access to public libraries. When illiterate soldiers do appear in materials intended for the general public, they serve as the inverses to the industriously reading soldiers that fill most of the LWS’s appeals. If soldier reading indexes military and civilian modernization, then soldier non-reading does the opposite. One of the few press notices about the army’s illiteracy problem, ominously headlined “Like a Land of Darkness,” captures this equation of illiteracy and anti-modernity in starkly technological terms:

For years statistics have been printed about the illiteracy of certain portions of these United States, but “What are statistics among friends?” Nobody ever pays attention to them. Now, however, our great national army has been gathered together and the real facts of illiteracy and general ignorance are being brought of the light of day. There are real ‘backwoods’ people in the United States, even in such an enlightened state as New Jersey, for instance. An American Library Association camp librarian over there reports discovering a man who had never seen a railroad train or street car until drafted into the national army. From Georgia came another recruit who had never talked through a telephone. (“More Stories”)

By aligning illiteracy with the “general ignorance” of “real ‘backwoods’ people” who have never seen trains and telephones, this notice reinforces the connection between reading and modernity that underwrites all of these appeals about soldier reading. Teaching illiterate soldiers to read thus means teaching them how to be modern: trains and telephones, the LWS suggests, will follow where books and librarians go. A section in *Soldiers, Sailors, and Books* called “Teaching Illiterate Soldiers” proclaims that in the camp library, there is “no more valuable book than the primers and first readers,” as the men who use them “will return to their homes vastly superior, vastly more useful and immeasurably happier than they were before the war” (16). In this view, the illiterate recruit who learns to read not only saves himself from the “land of darkness,” but also becomes an ambassador of modern values when he returns home. The library—as a technology of literacy and, therefore, of modernization—plays a critical role in effecting this material change.

That said, given the scope of the army’s illiteracy problem and the period’s general interest in illiteracy as a social and political problem (discussed in Chapter 2), it is noteworthy how little illiteracy figures in LWS materials, which focus much more on those soldiers and sailors who could already read. In general, the ALA’s aggressive publicity around depictions of self-directed, educational reading practices aligns with the association’s larger goals for the Library War Service. Because most educational reading was so closely associated with non-fiction and technical books, these anecdotes bolstered the ALA’s general claims that the LWS served a superior group of decidedly masculine readers who voluntarily turned to reading as a means of becoming better, more modern soldiers and men.

Reading for Fun

As much as LWS materials publicized the non-fiction, educational reading done by many soldiers, they still paid close attention to the other major use of books and reading: recreational reading. Positioned as the opposite of “reading to learn,” the choice to “read for fun” presented similar opportunities to propagate images of soldiers making the affirmative choice to read. In the early days of the LWS, the choice to read for fun was presented in stark moralistic terms: soldiers facing the unfamiliar tedium—and temptations—of camp life could either patronize a brothel or pick up a book. Many of the earliest appeals in issues of the *War Library Bulletin* from late 1917 seized on this dichotomous choice between reading and vice. As the LWS asked for “good books for their [soldiers’] dull and lonesome periods” (“Why \$1,000,000?” 2), they explicitly identified reading as “counteracting evil influences in the vicinity of the camps” (“Editors” 4). In this respect, ALA camp library services fit into the recreational and moral regime of the CTCA, as an editorial from the *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News* (reproduced in the second number of the *War Library Bulletin*) makes explicit:

The libraries so far established are proving of incalculable value as an antidote for drinking, gambling, and dissipation of all kinds, practically 75% of the men preferring a book to a pack of cards, a bottle of rum, or a set of dice. (“Editors”)

A later edition of the *War Library Bulletin* cites the “moral effect of good reading in preventing hours of idleness filled with temptation” as an effective publicity “appeal” for libraries looking to collect more donated books (“Organization” 4). In Secretary of War Newton D. Baker’s grand vision of using camp training to provide U.S. troops with an “invisible armor [...] made up of a set of social habits,” the reading habit that camp libraries might inculcate would help protect troops from temptation as it prepared them to be more effective soldiers and ambassadors of

American social ideals (qtd. in Bristow 15). As the war went on, however, these zero-sum formulations of the moral stakes of soldiers' reading gave way to more tempered, descriptive, and surprising accounts of how soldiers turned to books and reading in their spare time.

What types of books were soldiers reading for recreation? Again, as with soldiers' educational reading choices, press releases intended for public consumption provided illustrative details of soldiers' recreational reading choices. Most of these appeals for recreational reading materials focused on the need for fiction, usually phrased as "good current fiction" ("News"). Within this category of "good fiction," appeals usually zeroed in on specific genres that were most popular among soldiers. One appeal lists "fiction of the adventurous-romantic school," "detective stories," westerns, and boys' books ("News"); another lists popular authors such as "Kipling, Doyle, McCutcheon, O. Henry, Stockton, Bindloss, Tarkington, Hopkinson Smith, Oppenheim, etc," to signal the need for a mix of adventure, detective, regional, and realist fiction ("Books for the Camps" 7). Notably, there are multiple appeals for poetry as well, in addition to endless calls for boys' books. But above all, the message of the LWS appeals is that almost any book will do. As a full-page press release from December 1918 states, "Indeed, it may almost be said that any book that is popular with the general reading public is popular with the soldiers" ("News").

While LWS publicity materials do tend to divide soldier reading into educational and recreational categories, the line between these two modes of reading—and the genres of text implicated in each reading practice—is by no means firmly drawn. In fact, unlike the newspaper book reviews discussed in the previous chapter, LWS materials often blur or challenge the presumably strict associations between certain genres and certain types of reading in order to give depth and specificity to soldiers as readers in the particularly contingent circumstances of

war. In one anecdote that is repeated across various publicity materials, a librarian reports with surprise on a muleteer who reads the latest Ford Model T user's manual for fun. According to the report, the soldier was a mechanic before the war, and reading the manual allows him to imagine the familiar comforts of his pre-war labor even as he is surrounded by mules in his outpost on the Mexican border ("Good Stories" and *SSB*). In a similar story, an ALA rep reports his surprise at a special request from a naval station in Montauk, NY, for the poetry of Rudyard Kipling—"especially his poems of the sea." As the representative wonders "what in the world naval officers studying hydro-aviation could find of value to them in the poetry of Kipling," the sailors answer this question for him and the reader: "The sea-poems are a text-book," they say, and the poems "explain things that no landlubber could possibly understand" ("Good Stories"). In both of these examples, soldiers and sailors are shown putting familiar genres to unfamiliar uses, finding imaginative escape in a textbook and a textbook in imaginative literature. By publicizing these particular instances of soldier and sailor reading, the LWS ennobles these individual readers and their reading choices, bizarre as they are presumed to seem to a reading audience back at home. In celebrating rather than disciplining these errant readings, LWS materials claim the soldier-reader as a particularly privileged type of reader, one who is trustworthy enough to play with texts in ways that other materials at the time (such as the silent reading tests and reading primers of Chapters 1 and 2) actively squashed.

This emphasis on the choice to read—independent of the content of the reading—resonates throughout the LWS appeals, perhaps even more in anecdotes that focus on recreational reading and fiction than on those that focus on explicitly educational reading. Given the moralistic tenor of earlier LWS appeals that position reading as an antidote to vice, it is worth noting that most of the camp life anecdotes are markedly agnostic in matters of taste, deferring

without demur to the soldier- or sailor-reader, no matter his choice of book. LWS officials seem to have recognized very early on that camp libraries would be different from regular public libraries in this important respect. A notice in the August 1917 *WLB* reminds librarians that among those books to be collected must be “Books for the uneducated, good books for boys.”

The admonishment continues:

All grades of men must be helped by these libraries. Some of the men have not reading habits. Books must be included which are not over their heads. Don't be too fastidious or too “high brow,” but help the humblest reader by accepting some titles which would not find a place in your library. (“Books for the Camps” 7)

By conceiving of a camp library service that included even the “humblest reader,” LWS officials are making a choice to set the more “fastidious” and “high-brow” impulses of their profession aside. The authors of this statement seem to understand that the underlying assumptions of many of the ALA's members—that beginners' books, as well as certain “grades of men,” may not “find a place” in regular public libraries—are particularly dangerous to the success of a camp library, which must operate according to a different set of contingencies.

In the anecdotes that appear in subsequent publicity materials, a general audience is given a similar lesson in recalibrating their expectations about who and what belongs in a library. For example, as the stories included on the “Good Stories from Camp and Trench” broadside highlight the wide variety of books, readers, and reading practices served by the LWS, they are careful not to editorialize too much on soldiers' selections. A story titled “Henty No Back Number,” for example, alerts the public to the surprising need for “boys' books,” stating that “thousands of soldiers, and even some officers, retain their taste for juvenile literature.” The article makes it clear that, apart from an anonymous Major who reads boys' books to relax, most of the demand for such books comes from soldiers who are themselves only boys:

The regiments in training there [at Columbus, NM] contain some very young soldiers, boys from remote ranches and border towns. They have read very little in their lives and the librarian in charge of the camp library is having a hard time getting them interested in books. Love stories they laugh at, and solid reading has no attraction for them. The librarian noticed that the few boys' books on the shelves were in use all the time so she sent a call for more. 'Anything to get them into the habit,' she says wisely.

Another story on this same press clipping sheet is similar in its emphasis on both the youth of most army recruits and the potential to turn them toward a life of reading—even if their first books are not as “solid” as the librarian may hope. Once again, these issues coalesce around the matter of genre. A librarian at Camp Travis, TX, reports that most young soldiers “profess to scorn the tender passion,” turning their noses up at romantic stories and requesting instead books about “the bad stuff,” which the librarian glosses as “the wild west variety of literature.” The reason for this apparent taste in “bad stuff” is directly related to these soldiers' age and maturity: “Most of them are sixteen, seventeen and eighteen years old. They all enlisted and are as undisciplined as jack-rabbits.” However, the last paragraph of the story gives the reader hope that with time and military discipline, these young readers' tastes will fall into line: “Give them time and they will change their taste in books.”

In both of the above cases, the camp librarians making these reports refrain from judging outright these young readers. Neither librarian shies away from providing the type of reading material—whether boys' books or westerns—that will appeal to their readers' own tastes and sensibilities, no matter the presumed quality of those types of books. The sentiment expressed in both stories is a familiar one: *any* reading is better than no reading at all, with the corollary hope that reading enough of “the bad stuff” will eventually lead to more developed literary tastes. “Anything to get them into the habit” seems the mantra of most LWS librarians, and, furthermore, this mantra is prominently featured in materials intended to garner support from a

general public. Again, LWS materials valorize the choice to read over the content of reading, an ideological distinction that puts the LWS squarely within a strain of library discourse on reading that emphasizes choice as central to the democratization of cultural access and consumption. These ideas are not new with the LWS: as Thomas Augst has argued, public libraries played a crucial role from at least the 1890s onward in redefining the reading habit as the “taste for reading as an activity, and not the value we impute to particular books” (175).¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the LWS materials are doing something novel within professional library discourse and more general discourses on reading by attaching this set of ideas about reading as an ethical practice to a distinct population of readers: young men or even boys who stand at the antipode of the highbrow literary pole. In celebrating the choices of *these* readers, the LWS materials may undermine claims made elsewhere as to the cultural superiority of the non-fiction-reading soldier, but they reinforce the larger theme of the value of general self-directed reading.

Of course, even as LWS anecdotes publicly celebrate the choices soldiers are making to read, these same materials comment occasionally on the distinct (that is, markedly lowbrow or juvenile) choices of some soldier readers. In these rare but unmistakable concessions to standards of taste, we can see the otherwise progressive librarians of the LWS acknowledging that the audience for these appeals—the “general reader” back home—may still find value in more hierarchical models of culture. While the librarians whose stories are featured in publicity materials tend to err on the side of “the reader knows best,” some of their encounters with a supposedly less-sophisticated reader are played for laughs as well as for publicity. In these

¹⁵⁸ While this idea that “the people themselves were given authority over what they ought to read” was “more or less current among librarians by 1920,” debates have persisted—particularly over the role of fiction in purposive reading—into the twenty-first century (Garrison 89). See Ross for a contemporary discussion of how competing models of reading dating from the early twentieth century continue to structure professional discourse around issues of how and what readers choose to read.

humorous anecdotes, told at the unwitting soldier's expense, we can see these materials tempering their more radical messages about reading for a slightly more conservative audience. For example, one story tells of British soldiers in Flanders who wanted to plant a garden but needed some help getting started. The story continues:

A hardened old sergeant recalled that somebody had written a book called "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch." To the soldier-farmer this had the sound of an appropriate text-book. So he got it from the American Library Association camp library near by. ("Good Stories")

At this point, the reader at home confronting this story in a newspaper or magazine should be chuckling at the naiveté of the soldier-farmer, for the reader knows what the soldier does not: that *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch* is not a practical gardening guide, but a 1901 novel by Alice Hegan Rice. The novel's immense popularity—as both a best-selling novel and a stage play—makes the soldier's mistake all the more worthy of a laugh. A similar story appears in "More Stories from Camp and Trench," in which a camp hospital librarian reports that a soldier did not take kindly to the recommendation that he read a book by F. Marion Crawford. "I never could stomach books written by women," the soldier says, mistaking the popular author's gender based on his name and betraying his lack of cultural sophistication in the process. Both stories rely on a similar dynamic: the reader back home can laugh along so long as she knows something of popular literary culture—the type of information that the book reviews (discussed in the previous chapter) disseminated and made essential to a certain idea of cultural literacy. Secure in this knowledge, she can read with bemusement—and a certain amount of pity, perhaps—of the soldiers who lack this seemingly essential information.

And yet, both the Crawford and the Cabbage Patch stories end in ways that give some hope to the reader back home, the hope that, through the services of the LWS, these soldiers may yet be rescued from their literary ignorance. The Cabbage Patch story ends with the assurance

that, despite the soldier's mistake, the book was still worthwhile: "When the book came it was a disappointment, but all the men enjoyed reading it." The Crawford story has a similar coda, though with a more humorous twist. The stubborn soldier ends up liking the Crawford book that the librarian has given him; nevertheless, when he returns for more, he still "called for everything 'She wrote.'" The winking end of this story captures a critical tension at play in both these stories and the project of the Library War Service overall. On the one hand, by allowing the reader back home to laugh at these less sophisticated soldier-readers, these stories are concessions to existing hierarchies of taste, quality, and knowledgeability—important concessions, given that the majority of the stories from camp and trench go to pains to show how little these traditional guarantors of literary value matter in camp libraries. On the other hand, by showing that the soldier still insists on calling Crawford a "she," the story immediately undermines this small concession, reinforcing the LWS's dominant message that, in the extreme conditions of camp and trench, the paratextual apparatuses of literary culture do not matter as much as the individual choice to read. As with anecdotes that valorize soldiers' self-directed education, the mixed tone and content of anecdotes about how soldiers read for fun publicize a version of reading that values the specific needs, interests, and occasional ignorance of the soldier-reader. And as educational anecdotes position librarians as expert technocrats enabling the study and practice of modern military science, these anecdotes show librarians enabling the development of a modern reading habit.

Reading for Health in Body and Mind

One additional use case appears in LWS appeals for books, particularly those produced toward the end of the war and during the period of demobilization following the Armistice: reading for recuperation. Hospital libraries take center stage in these appeals, which show how

books, reading, and hospital librarians help heal the physical and emotional traumas of war. The December 1918 “News from the LWS” is particularly dense with hospital anecdotes demonstrating the physical effects—both good and bad—of reading. One item, “Books Help Surgeons,” cleverly pivots from its title: instead of describing how books such as medical dictionaries or surgical handbooks fit into the educational reading practices of surgeons, the anecdote focuses on how a patient’s reading can have medical benefits. Not only can reading “keep a man’s mind occupied” during “a long, irksome convalescence,” but also without the distraction of reading, the story claims, men are prone to despondency and depression to such an extent that they “block their own progress again and again because their interest in life [is] gone.” A different anecdote in the same press release makes an even stronger claim to this cause-and-effect relationship: “Unhappy endings have been known to cause lasting depression in military hospitals.” As evidence of this claim, yet another item tells of a soldier who dies after reading an adventure serial: “The story was such a lurid affair that it actually increased his fever. He died the morning the next instalment [sic] was received” (“News”). As with appeals that aimed to show how books and reading could further military science, these appeals show a similar interest in turning to books as a medical technology, anticipating the formal development of “bibliotherapy,” the programmatic application of books and reading in clinical settings that would blossom in the years following the war.¹⁵⁹

Despite this modern veneer, anecdotes about recuperative reading tend to be among the most conservative in the corpus of LWS publicity materials. By warning against the deleterious effects of reading—and of fiction reading in particular—these stories embrace older ideas about reading, many of which seem incongruous with other publicity anecdotes that openly celebrate

¹⁵⁹ Sweeney discusses how bibliotherapy emerged in the 1920s, thanks in large part to the efforts of Sadie Peterson Delaney, the chief librarian at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Tuskegee, AL (33-37).

the unsanctioned and unexpected ways in which soldiers use books. Hospital-based anecdotes also tend to circulate more traditional images of librarians—not as efficiency experts or liberal gatekeepers to the reading habit, but as sentimentalized caretakers of unfit readers.

Unsurprisingly, most of the librarians described in such terms are women, who found ample work opportunities in hospitals, where library work overlapped with pastoral care in a way that was more amenable to the gendered prejudices of both ALA and Army officials. By spring 1919, there were 68 hospital librarians and 36 assistants representing the ALA, the majority of whom were women (Young 56).¹⁶⁰ *Soldiers, Sailors, and Books* tells its readers, “The American Library Association selects its hospital books with especial care. It assigns the position of hospital librarian to women of the highest possible qualifications” (*SSB* 17). This claim that both books and librarians are carefully selected for hospital service echoes other appeals that show how soldiers’ reading interests and needs shape all camp library services. At the same time, the emphasis on female librarians also seems to undo the work of earlier LWS publicity materials that tried to appropriate the masculinity of soldiers and their reading practices to librarians themselves. By the end of the war, the female hospital librarian appears in anecdotes and photos, portrayals that reactivate the association of librarianship with a particularly gentle version of femininity (fig. 4.20). Coupled with the older ideas about reading that circulate in hospital library anecdotes, it is not hard to imagine that the potency and familiarity of such images may have contributed to the ultimate failure of the LWS to affect lasting change in public perceptions of librarianship.

¹⁶⁰ Here, the ALA’s labor practices resemble those of other service organizations such as the Red Cross and YMCA, who relied on female labor, as well as those of the U.S. military. Susan Zeiger retraces the history of the 16,500 women who enlisted with the AEF to serve as drivers, telephone operators, secretaries, canteen workers, and nurses (among others). Zeiger’s work is notable in its emphasis on working class women rather than on those middle or upper-middle class women whose memoirs of the romance of war service tend to dominate histories of women’s work in the war. Interestingly, ALA librarians are mentioned only in passing.

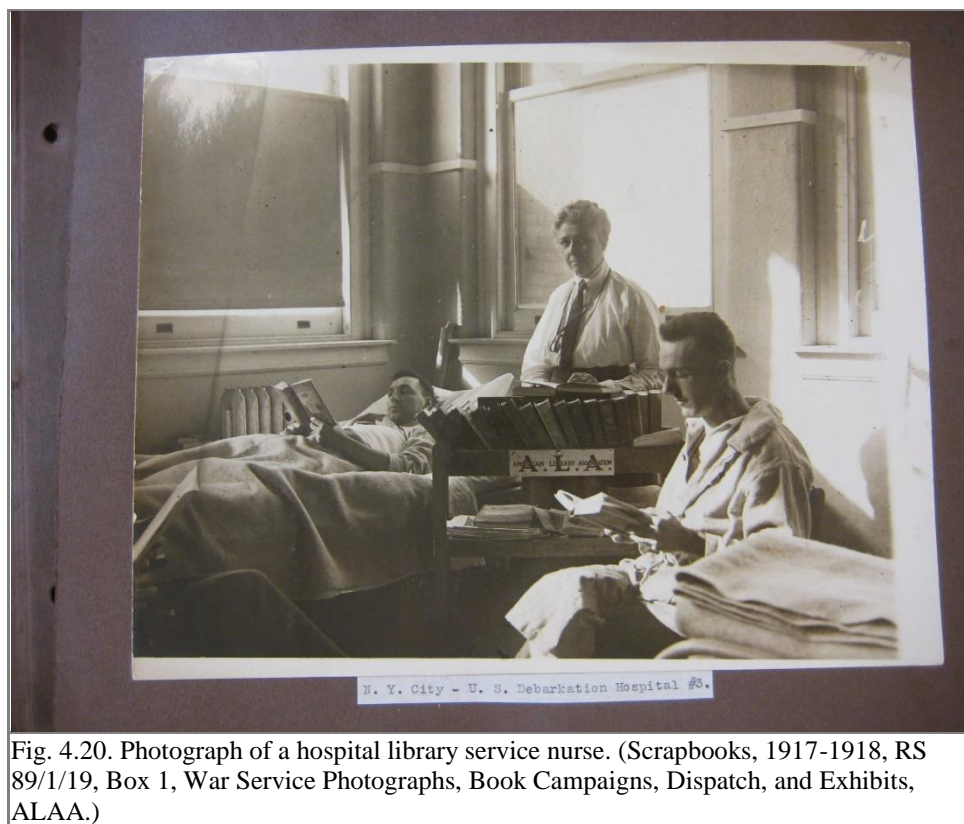


Fig. 4.20. Photograph of a hospital library service nurse. (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/19, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

That said, the tendency in such scenes of recuperative reading to fall back on older models of both reading and librarianship may speak to another recuperative impulse. As anecdotes show soldiers preparing to come home, often in dramatically different physical and mental states from when they first left, this particular strain of publicity anecdote may show how books and reading can help recuperate the time and distances lost in war. One anecdote coins a new genre of book—“Home-Sick Books”—to describe the type of book that can transport a soldier home (“Good Stories”). While most books in this genre are novels set in a soldier’s home region (very often Westerns), the previously mentioned anecdote of the muleteer reading a Ford manual shows that any book can serve this transportive purpose. Other anecdotes focus on the material of the books themselves, which come to signify the care and attention of the homefront. Pleas for “clean, bright books,” not the “cheap dirty dogeared books that tend to fill donation

boxes” recognize how these materials speak to soldiers themselves (“News”). A “human interest” story in the February 1918 *War Library Bulletin* shows how donors can go one step further and leave inscriptions to soldiers in their gift books.¹⁶¹ Lest the reader doubt the meaningfulness of these inscriptions, an anecdote from the “More Stories” press release demonstrates their power. In an anecdote titled “The Right Thing at the Right Time,” a librarian has trouble getting through to a shell-shocked patient until the patient opens a book and sees the name of the book’s donor inscribed inside. “Why,” the soldier says, “this book comes from my old school teacher down at Danbury, Conn.” This serendipitous reminder of a life before the war jolts the soldier and gives him “a renewed interest in life,” something that the article notes that “psychiatrists with all their skill fail to do” for so many shell-shocked soldiers (“More Stories”).¹⁶² In this and other cases, readers are told, “Books are the almost universal agency of help,” and they help by contracting the temporal and spatial distances between soldiers and the homefront (“News”). This particular understanding of reading may come at the expense of more modern ideas about libraries, books, and reading, but it also affords the comforts of abstraction about “the humanizing, helpful effects of good reading” (“More Books Needed”). Ultimately, anecdotes about recuperative reading do not merely show reading as a means of recuperation; they also capture a larger desire to recuperate reading itself from the radical new forms the practice takes in the exigencies of war.

¹⁶¹ One such inscription in a German textbooks reads, “For the boys to study German with so that they can order the prisoners around”—a wonderful illustration of how the public conceived of reading as both educational and a military necessity (“Intimate Views”).

¹⁶² Kingsbury examines the role that images of “home” play in wartime propaganda. For the most part, the “home” (often personified in women and children) is threatened and in need of protection (220-226). It is interesting, then, that these depictions of home seem so removed from the atrocities (exaggerated or otherwise) of war.

A Reading Army for a Reading Nation

In the details they provide about how soldiers and sailors used books, reading, and libraries in the war, LWS publicity materials circulated a particular image of the U.S. soldier. He reads to learn, to relax, and to feel better, to make himself more manly and more modern. The personal qualities of the U.S. soldier that appear in depictions of his reading—resourcefulness, camaraderie, curiosity, ambition, masculinity, and modernity—are familiar from other wartime depictions of America’s troops. That said, in their commitment to showing the American soldier as a reader, LWS publicity materials also reveal more surprising characteristics of this seemingly familiar figure.

One of the most consistent and surprising differences between the soldier-reader and other publicized images of U.S. soldiers appears around the issue of language. From the very beginning, LWS officials solicited books and magazines in a variety of languages, an acknowledgment of the fact that many U.S. army recruits spoke languages other than English. Instructions for the March 1918 book campaign, for example, explicitly identify “editors of foreign language publications” as publicity targets, highlighting a need for foreign language books (“Organization” 3). An anecdote in the previous issue of the *WLB* anticipates this recommendation by showing a group of Syrians in Camp Sheridan, AL, lining up in a camp library to read a Syrian newspaper that has been donated to the camp by its publisher (“Do the Men Read?”). In this way, LWS materials do not shy away from discussing the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the U.S.’s “polyglot army” (Stockbridge 8). This celebration of the army’s linguistic diversity often sits in uneasy equilibrium with patriotic nationalism. On the “More News” press release from late December 1918, for example, a story called “Who Are Americans?” offers a report from the librarian at Camp Dix, NJ, on “the American array” that

praises “how many nations have poured their blood into America and have poured it out upon the fields of France and what staunch Americans they are.” Right next to this story, however, is a snippet titled “American Stories Wanted,” which quotes this request from a soldier to a hospital librarian:

Just anything will be just right, if it’s only AMERICAN, that is, writing by a YANK, with an honest-to-God (this is a favorite expression) AMERICAN girl in it, and no French in it, please, and the scene right here in AMERICA, and we all like adventure you know. Funny isn’t it? You’d think we’d had enough of that.

The juxtaposition of the “American array” with this call for “honest-to-God American” stories shows how library work must juggle potentially conflicting versions of Americanism.

The juggling act is further complicated with a third anecdote on this same sheet of stories that paints an image of the hospital ward as a “melting pot of nationalities.” As the anecdote follows the hospital librarian as she pushes her book cart down the aisle—a hospital stretcher that “the Chinese orderly has transformed into a three-shelf truck”—the reader encounters a veritable kaleidoscope of ethnicities, nationalities, languages, and literacies:

A young Syrian silk worker, who can only read his native language, has as cot neighbors a Spanish reading Cuban and a Lithuanian miner from Pennsylvania. A stolid Turkish lad, who reads only modern Greek, will not believe that anything can be found for him, but his face gleams when he gets Dumas’ “Mohicans of Paris” translated into his beloved Greek.

Next a graduate of Harvard chooses the New Republic for his own reading and calls the A.L.A. Librarian’s attention to a New Mexican Indian in the next bed who can’t read at all but likes to look at pictures. A Russian insurance agent from Paterson, New Jersey, can read English but longs for Ibsen’s plays in Russian and is delighted when it is handed to him.

This anecdote is ostensibly meant to show off the librarian’s remarkably varied and capacious cart of books, but it also shows the reader an equally capacious vision of American national identity, a crucible in which linguistic differences do not melt down even as differences in national identity do. Across the “More News” page, the crucial solvent in this melting pot is

reading. Whether soldiers ask for Ibsen, an American story, or a picture book, whether they ask for it in English, French, or Modern Greek, the choice to read is ultimately what unites this array of soldiers and makes them all American. By using books and reading as a lens onto the make-up of U.S. troops, LWS publicity materials are able to show a more textured, more diverse version of American nationalism. In images of soldiers reading in a variety of tongues, the LWS appears to speak back to the “rank nativism” of “100 percent Americanism,” a buzzword and movement that sought to “stamp out all traces of Old World identity among immigrants” (Kennedy 67).¹⁶³ These images also seem to contradict the military’s own investments in Americanization and English language instruction evident in the reading primers they produced, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Certain divisions do persist, however, most notably along lines of race. While the ALA’s publicity materials readily mention foreign-language-speaking troops, they are almost totally silent on the topic of the nearly 400,000 African American soldiers who served in the segregated army (Williams 3). In one respect, this absence of black troops from LWS publicity materials simply reproduces a structural reality: the ALA provided books for use in segregated YMCA huts¹⁶⁴ but did not build or maintain its own separate library facilities to serve African American soldiers (Young 33). Thus, black soldiers would have had limited contact with LWS officials, and the few mentions of black soldiers as readers in LWS publicity materials demonstrate this circumscribed position as members of the “reading army.” One anecdote shows how hospitals provided a rare opportunity for black soldiers to come into contact with the ALA, as an item in

¹⁶³ “100 percenters” were the force behind the wartime craze of renaming sauerkraut, “liberty cabbage,” and dachshunds, “liberty hounds” (Kennedy 67) Notably, none of the soldiers in LWS materials are shown reading German. See Wiegand for a discussion of how local public libraries dealt with the issue of German-language books in their collections during both neutrality (9-15) and war (93-95).

¹⁶⁴ One such YMCA branch in St. Nazaire, France, served nearly 8,000 black soldiers (Young 71).

the “News” press release mentions, “A casual evening visit to the extreme psychopathic ward brought requests for detective fiction from three white and two negro patients.” Another instance of highly mediated contact between the ALA and African American soldiers appears in Theodore Koch’s *Books in the War: The Romance of Library War Service* (1919), the association’s self-laudatory account of its wartime activities. Koch reproduces a lengthy letter sent to LWS headquarters from a white officer in charge of a regiment of nearly 3,000 African American soldiers stationed in France. In his letter, the officer requests hundreds of books for the two-thirds of his regiment that can read, many of whom “are only a few months, at most, from cotton fields to khaki” (83). In the officer’s paternalistic request for books “neither too mature nor too elementary”—“Attractively written histories and patriotic romances are needed; stories showing love of country, God, and virtue would be most welcome”—we can see how for some soldier-readers, the type of self-directed reading habit that other LWS materials valorize was impossible to practice. In its racial politics, the LWS not only reproduced the inequalities of the segregated military but also extended the inequalities of segregated library and literacy practices across the United States.¹⁶⁵ In a very real way, then, the absence of African American soldiers from LWS publicity materials shows the limits of using reading as a proxy for inclusion in the American nation. A rare photograph of colored troops from Camp Gordon, GA, captioned “Reading to the Illiterate” cuts to the quick of this issue (fig. 4.21). As long as access to reading itself is circumscribed by race and region, the seemingly capacious image of America as a nation of readers will always be dangerously exclusive.

¹⁶⁵ In her recent history of segregated libraries, *Not Free, Not For All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow* (2015), Cheryl Knott recovers the complicated history of segregated public libraries, which “provided access points for black literacy and intellectualism” even as they “were part of the institutionalization of oppressive racial policies” (3).



Fig. 4.21. "Reading to the illiterate at Gordon, GA." (Scrapbooks, 1917-1918, RS 89/1/16, Box 1, War Service Photographs, Book Campaigns, Dispatch, and Exhibits, ALAA.)

The most curious articulation of how reading might mediate forms of difference during the war comes in an unexpected item from the "More News" press release. Under the headline, "How Germany Begged Books for Soldiers," the ALA announces that it has just received a translation of an "appeal signed by Hindenburg," the Chief of the General Staff of the German armed forces, which "shows the Hun's appreciation of the value of reading." The passage that follows—offered without editorial comment—reads as an uncanny double to the ALA's own publicity appeals:

It is the duty of those of us who stay at home to help keep up the spirits of our troops in the long, wearing task of war. Books are friends and mean spiritual power for our Army and our Navy. The book read in the trench, on shipboard, or in the hospital serves for more than mere entertainment or killing of time. It builds bridges to that world, which is at the time so far removed from the soldier, yet always the end and aim of his longing. Whether a story or an instructive work, whether humorous or serious, the book will gladden the heart, dispel sad thoughts,

and brighten the loneliness of the trenches and the dullness of the hospital. Books, therefore, are weapons that strengthen the spirit, and spirit is victory.

Hindenburg's appeal may serve as an example of knowing your enemy, a salvo offered to the American public in the hopes that its clear articulation of the value of books to the German troops will spur Americans to provide the same "weapons" to their own soldiers. However, the ALA's decision to publicize this appeal is also a trenchant admission of the fundamental humanity of the enemy. For the German soldier, as for the American, "the book will gladden his heart, dispel sad thoughts, and brighten the loneliness of the trenches and the dullness of the hospital." The generalities of Hindenburg's appeal can be imaginatively filled in with details about soldiers' reading practices provided by the copious materials of the LWS. In this remixing of Hindenburg's appeal with the ALA's own arguments for reading, we begin to see how reading may not only serve as a weapon in war, but also as a medium for peace. The types of reading practices publicized by the ALA—reading as a seemingly universal and yet highly contingent personal practice—have a crucial role to play in a civil society that hopes to overcome the forces of tyranny and war.

Conclusion

In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (first edition, 1975), his now-classic account of the British experience of World War I, Paul Fussell celebrates "the unparalleled literariness of all ranks who fought the Great War" (169). In soldiers' letters, diaries, songs, and poems, Fussell finds evidence to argue that the British soldiers and officers who fought along the Western Front were "not merely literate but vigorously literary," the products of an educational system that fostered "an atmosphere of public respect for literature unique in modern times" (170). By contrast, argues Fussell, "It was not so in America": while Britain's troops faced the war with a rich armory of literary allusion, American soldiers lacked the same type of national literary

consciousness (171). So while Wilfred Owen was well-equipped to write a poem like “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Fussell laments, “It is unthinkable that any American poem issuing from the Great War would have as its title and its last two lines a tag from Horace familiar to every British schoolboy” (171).

Fussell’s thesis that a distinct literariness saturated the British experience of—and subsequent myth-making around—World War I has proven to be as problematic as it is influential. Plenty of subsequent historians have taken issue with Fussell’s “demographic and archival bias,” as he draws his evidence almost exclusively from archives left by officers and soldiers from the upper class, resulting in a “highly accurate, but equally unrepresentative” history (Towheed and King 5-6).¹⁶⁶ However, his assumptions about the relative unliterariness of American soldiers have seemed to go untouched. In fact, in an essay titled ““Please send me *Tess of the Dr. Rbyvilles* (Harding)’: The Reading Preferences of American Soldiers during the First World War,” Jonathan Arnold seems almost to confirm Fussell’s hunch, using archival evidence from the ALA’s Library War Service. Drawing from book requests from American servicemen sent to the ALA, Arnold argues, “The presupposition that the newly enlarged American army [...] was distinctly intellectual in its reading habits is far from accurate,” despite ALA claims to the contrary (100). The few letters that the ALA received requesting “highbrow” materials provided the association with “plenty of public relations ammunition to push its claims about the American soldiers’ elevated reading habits” (109). However, for Arnold, letters such as the one he quotes in his essay’s title, with its misattribution and misspelling of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, reveal something closer to the truth about soldiers as readers.

¹⁶⁶ Elsewhere, King has done highly detailed and sensitive work to fill in many of the gaps left by Fussell by approaching the reading experiences of more ordinary soldiers through studies of a YMCA librarian and British schemes to deliver books to prisoners-of-war (see King, “Books Are More,” and King, “E.W. Hornung”).

Like Fussell's claims about World War I as "a literary war," Arnold's reading of soldiers' letters to the LWS is borne of familiar desire: for reading—and particularly reading in times of trauma and upheaval—to mean something more than usual. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that we can build a genealogy of this desire by turning to documents like the ALA's publicity materials. In their images and descriptions of soldier-readers actively engaged with different types of reading, the Library War Service consolidated and circulated a version of this desire for reading to be meaningful beyond the bounds of an individual practice. Just as other forms of propaganda emphasized the threat that war posed to American ideals, the Library War Service publicity appeals emphasized the positive potentials of war. Showing soldiers choosing to read—whether they actually did so or not—provided reassuringly positive images of how U.S. participation in the war might be changing Americans—and specifically, young, American men—for the better.

To Arnold's point, it almost goes without saying that the ALA exaggerated its public relations claims, and I have not taken the anecdotes of press releases such as "Good Stories from Camp and Trench" as reliable reports of what and how soldiers actually read. However, if we focus exclusively on recovering and judging the realities of soldiers' reading practices, we run the risk of ignoring the very real work that exaggerated representations of soldiers' reading practices were asked to do during the war among both civilians and soldiers. Rather than asking how the ALA exaggerated claims about soldiers as readers, I have asked why the ALA was invested in publicizing these exaggerated claims. As this chapter has shown, the discursive creation of the "soldier-reader" became a way for professional librarians to redefine "reading" in very specific terms—self-directed, purposive, masculine, and modern—that responded to both professional pressures and widespread notions of how books, libraries, and reading fit into

modern life. By reading the publicity materials of the Library War Service *as* publicity materials—that is, as strategic forms of messaging meant to mobilize “emotions and ideas”—we can grapple with the meaning of soldier reading even if we do not know exactly what or how soldiers read. As I have maintained throughout this dissertation, this indirect evidence of real reading can provide direct evidence of the desires that get attached to reading, as representations of reading are used to mobilize emotions and ideas in times of peace as well as war.

Conclusion

What Can Reading Do for You?

Throughout this dissertation, I have offered a prismatic view of “reading” in the early twentieth century United States, with each chapter refracting different aspects of this complex practice and generating different definitions of “reading” and “being a reader.” In Chapter 1, we saw how “readers” and “reading ability” were created by the newly designed and implemented instruments of the educational measurement movement. By retracing the early development of standardized silent reading tests, when test makers, through trial and error, discovered and reproduced the limits of testable reading, we can see how a new suite of ideas became attached to reading. Objectivity is chief among these new ideas: on tests, there is only ever one correct reading whose correctness attains a type of self-evident status, arrived at by the scientific method and confirmed by tests of statistical reliability. The specific format of reading test questions helped reinforce this notion of objectivity in reading, as questions increasingly effaced the interpretive moves required to arrive at the correct answer. Equally important was the content of reading tests, which elevated specific, situated forms of cultural knowledge to the level of general knowledge. Objective reading thus became “standardized reading,” as the line between “reading” and “not reading” was no longer policed by individual reading instructors working from an idiosyncratic set of personal benchmarks, but by mass-produced, mass-disseminated reading tests. These tests not only provided new tools for ensuring that “reading ability” was the same across the nation, but they also circulated the very idea that “reading ability” *should* be the same everywhere, across different schools and among different students. The longevity of the

ideas packaged in standardized silent reading tests—that reading can and should be standardized, that readers can and should be compared—speaks to the desire to treat an individually-variable practice as a stable signifier of communal fitness.

Compared to the view of reading and readers afforded by the reading tests of Chapter 1, the adult reading primers of Chapter 2 offer an almost diametrically opposite view. At the same time that silent reading tests were advancing a notion of reading as wholly objective and standardized, the primers and pedagogy of Cora Wilson Stewart emphasized the subjective, fluid, and personal aspects of “reading ability” and “being a reader.” What is more, Stewart’s materials communicated these more expansive meanings of reading to the readers—or rather, non-readers—who stood to benefit most from them. Within the conceptual framework of the standardized test, adult beginning readers were already off the charts (and not in a good way): standards of reading ability that had been normed to six-, eight-, or ten-year-olds could not account for the apparent unnaturalness of adult illiteracy. In examining how Stewart’s primers addressed the specific situation of adult beginning readers, we can see how learning to read as an adult is, of course, profoundly alienating, but also counter-intuitively liberating: without a test’s stringent standards to police the line between reading and non-reading adults, “literacy” could take on much more capacious, flexible, and personalized meanings. In Stewart’s primers, the beginner’s lesson, “I can read and write,” is an oath of allegiance to new forms of personal behavior and social relationships. “Reading” as textual processing (of the sort demanded by a silent reading test) is shown to be not nearly as valuable to Stewart’s adult students as non-textual actions that nonetheless signify as “literate.” Accordingly, this new type of “reading” is not enabled or assessed by a textual instrument like a test, but is instead performed and embodied by students caring for their homes, their families, their communities, and themselves. Despite all

of these points of contrast, the forms of “reading” and “being a reader” enabled by both standardized silent reading tests and Stewart’s primers share the assumption that reading is a means of understanding one’s place in a larger social whole. What the testing movement achieved with classroom charts and histograms, Stewart enacted in forms of community policing around illiteracy. The Moonlight School mantra of “Each One, Teach One,” based on a logic of dispersed personal responsibility, meant that part of “being a reader” was staying vigilant against forms of illiteracy in one’s own community. Ultimately, both the standardized silent reading tests of Chapter 1 and the adult reading primers of Chapter 2—and indeed, the materials in Chapters 3 and 4 as well—aim to make “readers” knowable to other readers by their performances of “reading,” whether those performances are elicited by a test or implied in the condition of one’s house or farm.

The definitions of “reader” and “reading” generated by Chapter 3’s exploration of newspaper book reviews show how readers continue to be “made” well beyond the stage of initially learning to read. Rather than treat newspaper book reviews as neutral documents of a history of textual reception, I show how book reviews in a variety of kinds of newspapers provided dynamic maps of the terrain of literary culture, maps that the review’s readers could use to parse their own relationship to that culture. In what is perhaps the most recognizable definition of reading in this dissertation, “being a reader” comes from proximity to and a sense of (at least imagined) participation in bookish culture, something that book reviews can offer to their mass newspaper-reading audiences. “Being a reader” in this sense does not require a wholesale abnegation of personal preferences and tastes, but instead leaves room for the reader, with the help of her “scout,” to understand how her preferences and practices position her within this culture. “Reading” in this chapter is therefore once again defined as a way of recognizing and

assessing other readers—of keeping tabs on the “bubblers,” as Fanny Butcher would write of the purpose of her *Tabloid Book Review*. These other readers included famous authors and critics as well as more generalized types: figurative readers whose relationships to the literary are informed by demographic and cultural identities, as well as by certain textual preferences or sensitivities. Knowing about other readers provides a means of calibrating one’s own sense of readerly identity, even if—or perhaps, especially if—that identity turns out to be similar to many other “ordinary readers.” Once again, being a reader is a relational exercise, as the individual reader must understand herself in terms of multiple levels of community and belonging.

In terms of geography, the spread of the newspaper book review falls somewhere between the hyper-local lessons and enforcement mechanisms of Stewart’s books and the seeming sense of placelessness and universality that falsely comes with the standardization of silent reading tests. My focus on book reviews from major Midwestern newspapers adds an additional intermediary sense of place to the “reading” described in Chapter 3. If literary culture is traditionally localized in New York, then newspaper book reviews operating on the periphery of the publishing world have a distinctly different relationship to the task of “scouting” and mapping this literary terrain for their local readers. As we can see quite vibrantly in Fanny Butcher’s reviews, such reviews must at once uphold the distance of the literary while also providing the reader with a sense of closeness and involvement. I argue that the figure of the “ordinary reader” provides exactly this type of liminal idiom for Butcher, as she uses this figure to vivify previously unimaginable forms of participation for readers without tangible connections to literary culture.

As the newspaper book review gives us language to think about readers as types, the publicity materials in Chapter 4 from the *Library War Service* zero in on one specific type of

reader, the soldier-reader. Just as Stewart's students are shown consciously rejecting a life of illiteracy, the soldier-reader also consciously chooses books and reading over the temptations and tedium of the training camp. The affirmative choice to "be a reader" in this context earns the soldier-reader a certain level of trust from the librarians and donors who enable his practice. Even when he asks for trashy westerns, we are told again and again in anecdotes advertising the Library War Service, the soldier-reader can be trusted to read his chosen materials in a properly instrumental way: to advance his military skills, to relax his mind, or to heal for life after the war. Without a doubt, the trust that librarians had in soldiers' reading practices was a function of the whiteness and maleness of most of the soldier-readers shown in ALA publicity materials; however, even those soldier-readers who were foreign-born or who read in foreign languages could be assimilated into the "Americanness" of the typified soldier-reader purely by choosing to read. Ultimately, the soldier-reader serves as much more than a model for a specific type of reader, and instead stands as an advertisement for the larger belief in the usefulness and goodness of reading itself.

While the soldier-reader is the primary type of reader discussed in the final chapter, another readerly type emerges in the ALA's publicity campaigns: the reader at home who, with gifts of money, books, or time, supports the reading habits of others. By arguing that one way of showing your status as a "reader" was to support other readers and the institutions that enabled their practices, the ALA used "reading" as a means of forging meaningful bonds among a far-flung, diverse community. In her appeals to volunteers and philanthropists, Cora Wilson Stewart relied on similar forms of readerly generosity, but in the particular intellectual environment of wartime, when readerly bonds overlapped and reinforced other forms of imagined national solidarity, the "reading" that the Library War Service publicized and hoped to enable took on

additional nationalized meaning. Indeed, out of all the case studies presented here, Chapter 4 provides the most explicitly nationalized angle onto “reading” and “being a reader.” As the ALA provided books and magazines to soldiers and sailors in war, the association suggested that reading was one of the core American values that the United States was fighting to defend.

Taken together, the four case studies presented in this dissertation offer new ways to understand how reading was conceived of as a form of sociality in the early twentieth century United States. Beyond simply showing sites where individuals in the past read together—perhaps the most common way of studying and describing reading as a social practice—I have explored sites in which “reading” provided a more abstract means of understanding one’s place in a social imaginary. For many of the readers in the preceding pages, these forms of sociality often did involve reading the same texts as other readers, whether that text was a standardized silent reading test administered to students across the country, a newspaper book review that circulated in regional networks, or a primer designed specifically for local use. In addition to reading the same texts, however, these readers learned a second, sometimes even more important lesson in decoding and interpretation: reading the world around them for the presence of other readers. Each of the preceding chapters shows how different institutions insisted that an essential part of “being a reader” at any level of literacy was being able to recognize other readers: to find them, to perform for them, to support them, to approve of them, and ultimately to identify with them to varying degrees. All of the forms of community enabled by reading in these chapters relied on this type of readerly recognition, as well as on an equally important sense of dis-identification with non-readers.

Indeed, illiteracy and the threat it poses to reading-based communities haunts every chapter of this dissertation, making non-reading an equally important concept for the generation

of definitions of and uses for reading. While Chapter 2 provides the most direct approach to non-readers, each chapter shows how anxieties around illiteracy were a crucial by-product of the period's expanding literacy. The tests explored in Chapter 1 provided a tangible, objective means of marginalizing students who struggled with reading, even when the best intentions of test makers were ostensibly to identify and help those very students. Non-readers have no place in the newspaper book review and only a marginal place in the ALA's publicity materials; nevertheless, this silence around illiteracy only serves to amplify the stakes of being a reader. If reading provides the basis for forms of belonging at multiple scales of place, what place (if any) do non-readers have? To return to a theme from the Introduction, if the history of reading is enriched by considerations of inventive and surprising non-reading uses of books, then this history is also deepened and darkened by considerations of the use of "non-reading" in a more pejorative sense. As institutional sites of reading, the case studies shown here are complicit in the stigmatization of non-reading, and one of the underlying claims of this dissertation is that making "readers" will always also make "non-readers" by opposition and negation.

In terms of method, using case studies has allowed me to show how similar ideas about reading circulated in different though ultimately related types of spaces. By taking this prismatic approach to reading, however, I have had to sacrifice some depth and breadth in this study. In each chapter, my ultimate focus has been on the textual materials that emerged from different institutional sites of reading. As a close reader myself, I have dedicated the most space and time to reading these textual materials for the latent and patent work they perform in generating ideas about reading. This close focus has meant that I have not spent as much time in describing the actual institutions that made these materials. While I have offered pertinent, summative details where I could, there is much more work to be done in exploring the specific institutional

environments that gave rise to these materials. In Chapter 3, for example, I have had to bracket Fanny Butcher's career-long struggle with her male supervisors at the *Chicago Tribune*. These institutional and personal relationships undoubtedly inflected her specific uses of the book review genre as a space of self-assertion for herself and her readers. In Chapter 1, much more could be said about the specific institutions of higher education that trained and sponsored educational researchers who developed the most popular silent reading tests. While the influence of Edward L. Thorndike's graduate curriculum at the Teachers College at Columbia University has been noted by others,¹ less attention has been paid to the fact that many of Thorndike's students went on to work in the Midwest at normal and state universities in places such as Iowa, Kansas, and Michigan. The Midwestern infrastructure of educational research in this period is thus a salient feature that I have nevertheless had to table in order to address the tests themselves. Finally, in every chapter, more elaborate institutional histories would reveal how central the labors of educated, middle-class, white women were to the larger project of making readers at all of these institutional sites.

I have also had to sacrifice a certain amount of breadth in describing the different contexts and discourses that influenced the sites of reading explored in this dissertation. A different version of my project might have been centered on the question of how reading played a part in ideologies of Progressive Era reform. To varying degrees, a general progressive faith in individual and social amelioration runs through each of my chapters, but reading plays an uneven, unpredictable role in these visions of reform. Attending more to the particularities of progressive political understandings of reading would help underscore how, for many of this project's sites and actors, reading was often an effective way of maintaining the *status quo*, even

¹ Most notably, Willis, who takes what she calls a genealogical approach to reading comprehension research (89).

as—and sometimes because—it was saddled with promises of change. A subset of such reform is the Americanization movement, an umbrella name for a broad group of programs and practices aimed at assimilating immigrants into a national imaginary. While I have pointed to some of the textbooks used to teach English language skills (including reading and writing) to immigrant adults, much more could be said about how anxieties around nationality fed into anxieties about literacy (and vice versa).² Additionally, as I argued in Chapter 1, discourses of objectivity helped educational researchers reconceive of reading as doubly objective: tests not only turned reading into an objective product, one measurable in the same way as weight and height, but also turned reading into an objective practice, one based on transferable standards that were external to the reader herself. A counter-strain to this idea of objective, standardized reading presents itself in the overriding emphasis on personal choice that permeates each of the other chapter's definitions of "reading." In a deeper consideration of these contexts, much more could be said about how concurrent developments in the histories of ideas such as objectivity and personal choice influenced many of the discourses on reading discussed here.

Finally, my overarching method of taking materials more often discussed in other fields and introducing them to a literary-historical audience has come with particular benefits and costs. On the one hand, my own disciplinary position has meant that I have asked important formal questions of materials which are often analyzed only in terms of their content. In Stewart's primers, for example, I have shown how the clear disciplinary intentions of her books' contents are amplified by the interplay between illustrations and text. Similarly, my reading of Butcher's book reviews emphasized the ways in which she stretched the formal parameters of the typical literary news and notes column in order to accentuate her role as a privileged intermediary

² For more on this dynamic relationship between crises of nationality and crises of literacy, see Wan; NeCamp.

between her ordinary readers and the extraordinary literary world. My reading method has also meant bracketing the types of critiques that experts in other fields might levy against these materials in favor of probing their discursive effects. The first silent reading tests obviously suffer from sampling biases and statistical unsophistication, but these artifacts of their historical moment do not detract from their value as telling documents of the desires behind rhetorics of standardization. Likewise, I have taken for granted that the ALA's publicity materials during World War I were not accurate portrayals of actual soldier-readers, but this concession does not lessen these materials' effects as calibrated representations of idealized soldier-readers; in fact, recognizing these materials as representations opens a new set of questions about what the ALA hoped to achieve with their appeals. In general, I have tried to push my readings beyond surface-level ideological critiques or dismissals in order to interrogate the trenchant desires that all of my sources attach to representations of reading.

On the other hand, while I have focused on generating close and careful readings of materials that do not always elicit such attention, I have not been able to pay as much attention to the disciplinary contexts in which these materials are more usually studied. In each chapter, I have made gestures to literatures on the history of education, journalism, and libraries, but the next step is to reintegrate my own readings with these existing conversations. Chief among such conversations are studies in the history of literacy, a field that is arguably one of the main arenas for the study of the political stakes of how reading and writing are taught, learned, and used. Ultimately, the possibilities for interdisciplinary conversations illuminated by this project show that no single discipline or methodological approach has a corner on the market for studying readers and that more work can be done to consciously account for the overlaps and differences

among the range of sites in our own academic institutions that have a vested interest in the study of readers and reading.

For all the potential interdisciplinary payoffs of work on reading, there remain specific disciplinary benefits as well. In my Introduction, I promised that my approach to studying reading in this period through mundane, institutional, non-literary materials would provide an oblique way of reflecting on the meanings of “literature” and “literary reading.” Furthermore, I suggested that such an oblique method was necessary to move beyond the rut created by more common approaches that tend to start and end with the literary, treating this particular practice as either a privileged center or as a separate sphere *vis-a-vis* other reading practices, readers, and texts. Through the case studies in this dissertation, I have suggested that the terrain surrounding literary reading is in fact rich with fascinating types of readers and reading. I have shown how silent readers, illiterate readers, ordinary readers, and soldier readers were all made to conceive of “reading” as a social performance, calibrated to the demands of different audiences and communities. I have also shown that literary-critical methods applied to unfamiliar types of texts can generate valuable insights about how reading has historically been conceived of and practiced. Fictional representations of reading are not the *only* representations of reading, and I have purposely eschewed fictional readers to make it clear that ideas about readers and reading circulated in many types of texts. In the cases studied here, these texts not only circulated widely, but were also buttressed by institutional structures that validated their messages and broadened their reach. Finally, rather than suggest that we reinstall “literary reading” in a place of privilege, I have insisted that we consider how our specific type of reading actually exists in continuity with un-literary or less-literary sites and practices. As literary scholars, we are not so different from the test makers, teachers, book reviewers, and librarians in this dissertation. We share their

desire for reading to mean something, as well as their faith that reading can do something—to the people who practice it and to the world at large. Professional literary readers, who find themselves increasingly called upon to justify the continued relevance of their specific reading practices, should therefore consider how others have argued for their own investments in reading—for better and for worse. Rather than shy away from the instrumentality of our reading practices—which, like the types of reading discussed here, have as their end goal the creation of a specific type of subject and specific forms of sociality—we should embrace the instrumental appeal of reading and find ways to describe more articulately the types of readers that we hope “literary reading” can make.

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