

## Book Review

# What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age

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In his book ‘Under the Cover’, which follows the life of a novel from its inception to reception, Clayton Childress uses field theory to define three distinct but interrelated fields in book culture – the field of creation (the writer), the field of production (the publisher), and the field of reception (the reader). Beth Driscoll’s fascinating new book explores this third field and offers an analysis of the ‘manifold practices’ of recreational readers, taking reading as a cultural practice which is ‘dynamic, meaningful, and infused with energy’ (p. 1) and considering it within a post-digital world of BookTok and Goodreads where print and digital co-exist and interact, and readers slip between online and offline spaces and between social and private activities.

In doing so, this book contributes to a field of scholarly work which concerns itself with the activities, relationships, meanings, and uses of reading, from Long’s (2003) study of book groups and Fuller and Sedo’s (2013) study of social reading events, to Felski’s (2008) work on why we read and Rubery’s (2022) exploration of neurodivergent reader practices. This field is referred to by Driscoll as ‘reading studies’ and she positions her work in relation to both literary studies where reading has been conceptualised through the relation between the reader and the text and where the academic (‘legitimate’) reader is favoured over the recreational one, and social science approaches which favour an empirical focus on the reader, particularly from book history and cultural sociology. Driscoll advocates for a model that combines these different perspectives and uses actor-network theory to look at the connections that readers form with books, other readers, academics, critics, publishers, and authors.

*What Readers Do* is based on two decades of research combined with extant qualitative studies. Presented here are case studies of digital platforms, analysis of bibliomemoirs (books about reading), social media analysis, qualitative research with book clubs, interviews with readers at literary festivals, personal reflections, ethnographic analysis of a reading group, and discourse analysis of media texts about reading. This rich array of methods is skilfully woven together to build an expansive and robust picture of recreational reading as ‘a multidimensional cultural practice that involves social and private, aesthetic and moral behaviours’ (p. 9).

The book sets out its intentions, scope, and methodological framework before exploring networks of readers in Chapter 2. This chapter considers readers as consumers, citizens, and conversationalists in relation to book retail, education systems, libraries, and ‘book talk’ at book clubs and festivals, and on online platforms, showing how readers interact with networks and make connections to enact their identity as readers.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the aesthetic aspects of reading and the ways that readers use books as ‘models for living’ (p. 10) in terms of constructing a ‘bookish’ identity or aligning with a particular genre. Driscoll argues that

this 'aesthetic conduct' is a socially-performed set of actions embedded in networks to construct a bookish life in relation to contemporary book culture.

Chapter 4 sees reading as a way to form and perform a moral stance in the world, suggesting that readers make moral judgments in relation to reading itself as a worthy endeavour, characters and plots, and authors and the publishing industry. Driscoll provides a valuable discussion on the role of empathy here, and considers moral disapproval of the actions of authors and publishers, often publicly performed in online discussion or enacted by the 'not reading' of a particular book, positioning this within the 'shifting power relations of contemporary book culture' (p. 113).

Having shown how *social* reading is, Chapter 5 turns to private reading practices, noting the methodological difficulty of researching interior experiences of reading. She addresses this challenge through a discourse analysis of 'pervasive and influential' (p. 119) social and mainstream media accounts of private reading, identifying three 'principal modes' used to describe the personal reading experience: eroticism (sensuality and desire), deep reading (uninterrupted and sustained), and mindful reading (meditative and related to well-being).

The concluding chapter reminds us of the 'incredible variety of practices and affects' (p. 137) associated with reading, described here as a cultural practice with social and private, aesthetic and moral, dimensions. Driscoll argues that book reading has proved to be remarkably persistent and adaptable and suggests that it will continue to thrive in the multiple networks and expressions of aesthetic and moral identity that readers enact, as well as its role in private self-care. She notes the limitations of reading that result from its relationship to capitalist systems and the potential for 'smug self-satisfaction' (p. 142), but ultimately makes a plea for the celebration of reading and advocates for readers.

This is a captivating, clearly-structured and beautifully-written book, accessible to the lay reader who can recognise themselves within its pages without requiring specialist knowledge due to the clear explanation of academic concepts. If I had to point to a limitation, perhaps more consideration of class in relation to access to book culture might have been valuable, although this is acknowledged and the book has a different focus. As a recreational reader myself – one who is currently, for some reason, struggling to read the fiction that I used to love – this book has reminded me of the joy of reading in all its myriad forms and drawn me back into that readerly (or 'bookish') world. It has inspired me to return to my To-Be-Read pile and for that I would like to thank the author. This valuable book will be enjoyed by literary studies and reading studies students and scholars, by authors, publishers, and, most importantly, readers.

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