

Readers and Retailed Literature: findings from a UK public High Street survey into purchasers' expectations from books

Abstract

Critical literature studies tend not to think about readers as customers and consumers or, in economic terms, end-users. From the Frankfurt School to World Literature, those critical studies have little to say about fiction from the viewpoint of readers as commercial actors aware of their participation in and construction of the market. But book retail, both online and off, remains the frame in which book-purchasing choices are made. To understand the hopes and desires of those readers, would it not make sense to ask them? Using the High Street bookshop as a metonymic site for reading within commodity culture, this article will present findings from a national survey with a corpus of 530 responses into expectations from purchased books. To ask what is expected from a book just purchased is simple, banal even, but collectively the answers to it can take the first tentative steps towards a political theory of reading, not from without, but from within our dominant economic frame.

From the perspective of readers who purchase fiction, any published work is mediated through the commoditised channels of publishing and book retail. Indeed, since the establishment of commodity culture – in Britain, during the last third of the nineteenth century at the latest – much of what we need in life is commercially mediated: from food and shelter, to the goods and services we buy for children and family. The question is how that commercial mediation frames our expectations and whether, in terms of reading fiction, that framing itself produces a particular reading experience. In defining commodity culture, I have elsewhere described it as a social organisation in which “the satisfaction of goals and the resolution of problems are achieved through commodity acquisition, to be measured in gains and losses.”¹ The language of private gain that is the heart of commodity culture is well suited for thinking about what publishers call general-market reading but, within literature studies, this reading experience is under-examined, to say the least. We know what gains a serious critical reading should aim for – as F.R. Leavis once wrote of Dickens when the great Victorian author's canonical status was yet to be determined; “The adult mind doesn't as a rule find

¹ Frost, S. “Reconsidering the Unknown Public: a puzzle of literary gains”, Baker, William ed. *Writing Lit: People, Publishers, Puzzles: a Tribute to John Sutherland*, Rowman and Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Littlefield Publishing Group: Lanham Maryland 2015. 3–15, 11.

in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness.”² But what of readers in their hundred-thousands who read Dickens for nothing more than entertainment; or better still, as Jan Radway’s seminal work established (1984), those readers who read entertainments with a sustained and serious purpose.

Purchasing a book involves the loss of other opportunities: of time and money that could have been used elsewhere. So why have people persistently accepted the opportunity costs of buying fiction? Design items, furnishings, apparel and even certain types of tourism can signify identities to which customers want access. But, when it comes to qualities such as personal encouragement, guidance, intellectual insight, or even a remedy against loneliness, then fiction satisfies in a way no other sort of material good can. Such benefits from fiction are not only utterly below the literary-critical radar but they also represent an individualised experience undetectable by retail studies focussed on mass-produced goods. If purchases of fiction are made for private gains, a first step to understanding general-market reading might be to undertake a survey asking readers what they expect to gain from a book they have just purchased.

The survey carried out has its roots in the material end of literature studies, more specifically in scholarship from the last decade, or so, on reading history and the material text; compellingly in large database projects such as, in the UK, the *Reading Experience Database*, or in the US *What Middletown Read*.³ But the idea of using empirical public-survey data to study literature is still relatively uncommon – the exceptions being either specific big-data projects from the digital humanities and research into reading groups, or in fields such as psychonarratology and some areas of cognitive poetics; with organisational representation through societies such as SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing) and IGEL (International Gesellschaft Empirische Wissenschaft).⁴

The research there is into the *benefits* of arts practice in general comes either from electronic mass-media studies, using theorised approaches such as Uses and Gratifications, or from cultural studies that, with emergent neo-liberalism in the 1980s, addressed the shift in assessing cultural arts

² Leavis, cited in Francis O’Gorman ed., *The Victorian Novel: a Guide to Criticism* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers 2002) 62. NB. Leavis later changed his mind in *Dickens the Novelist*, 1970. [Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 2 vols (New York, Simon and Shcuster: 1952) 802.]

³ Cf. Reading Experience Database (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php>) What Middletown read (<http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/about.php>)

⁴ References: Reading Experience Database <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/> ; What Middletown Read <http://www.bsu.edu/libraries/wmr/> ; Researching Readers Online <http://www.researchingreadersonline.com/> ; the Transliterations Project <http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/category/about> ; and teh Digital Reading Network <http://www.digitalreadingnetwork.com/> . See also DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Danielle Fuller *Reading Beyond the Book: the social practices of contemporary literary culture* (New York, Routledge, 2013). Useful surveys from the pre-digital era, incl. Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book*, (New Haven, Con., London, Yale University Press: 1988)

practices not in terms of intrinsic aesthetic value but of instrumental benefits to society: often defined as opportunities for employment, investment and urban regeneration.⁵ By 2009 at the latest, the trend was superseded by a *both-and* approach, which “no longer consider[ed] this instrumental/intrinsic dichotomy either meaningful or useful”.⁶ The two issues arising from these cultural studies approaches, however, are firstly that they operate with the public body *in toto*, in its (heterogenous) whole, as the primary unit of examination, rather than the individual, and all those other individuals and their particular chosen books who, whether they are aware of it or not, comprise society or what Actor Network Theory prefers to call a collective.⁷ Such civil-sphere and mass-media approaches can never tell us what an individual may idiosyncratically gain, in private, from her book. Secondly, the *both-and* approach exemplified in the ESRC report may have expressed a need to move beyond solely intrinsic and instrumental measurements of value, but failed to propose what that matrix might involve, beyond noting that benefits are ‘complex’ and that research needs to “find more comprehensive and meaningful ways of understanding the value and impact of culture [and] media ...”⁸

Surveys relevant to the current study, and which begin by canvassing the individual reader, are not in abundance. A significant example is the mighty BML UK survey of ca. 2000 respondents from 2000, *Reading the Situation: Book Reading, Buying and Borrowing Habits in Britain*. This survey found that 52% of adult readers read books as a way to relax or relieve stress, and furthermore that readers found the effort of reading (for 24% of adult readers reading was an opportunity to exercise the imagination) combined with the relaxation to form an experience unique from the more passive absorption of watching TV or listening to music.⁹ The BML study, however, was aimed at all reading (fiction and non-fiction in books but also reference and other genre in magazines and newspapers) and was driven by a pressing need to argue for the importance of libraries. It found that library lending and book buying were not competing but complimentary activities, each satisfying different needs. But it is precisely the particularities of the retailled-reading experience of fiction that now requires study. To an extent, the current survey is a coda to

⁵ See. “The Benefits of Public Art”, *Cultural Trends* 1994:23. Policy Studies Institute. 37–55, 37.

⁶ The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Seminar Series, Mapping the Public Policy Landscape, *Not Only But Also: Capturing the Value of Culture, Media and Sport*. ESRC, 2009. 5

⁷ See Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor network Theory* (N.Y., Oxford University Press: 2005) p. 14.

⁸ *Not Only But Also* ... p. 3.

⁹ BML (Book Marketing Ltd) *Reading the Situation: Book reading, buying and borrowing habits in Britain*, London: BML, 2000. P.12. For other surveys see BML 2000, p.3.

the BML study specifically for sociologists of retailed literature, and for book and literature historians.

A second survey worth noting is the Swedish, Uppsala-based *Reading Fiction in the Internet Society* project, in which 72 high-school/sixth-form college students were asked why they read fiction.¹⁰ Overwhelmingly, those readers read for entertainment, or rather for a sense of losing oneself in fiction, replying most frequently to the following answers: 2. För att få vila och avkoppling [To get rest and relaxation]; 3. För att uppleva verklighetsflykt [To experience a break from reality]; and 4. För att bli road och underhållen [To be amused and entertained]. Again, the current survey has sought to build on this, incorporating similar wording in its questions to those of the survey from Sweden.

Lastly, the current survey is part of a broader effort to establish verifiable data about readers' experiences but it also attempts to couch its findings in terms applicable to the commodity culture dominating civil society; the public and private domains of our lives that co-exist with business and the institutions of government. As such, the survey tries to understand industry fiction and its reading as a market-based activity, in much the same way as the book-buying public does. What follows, therefore, is one small attempt to understand fiction as a commercially-mediated social phenomenon, which operates between the private domain and the public; a bridging area that Hannah Arendt describes as the political home of storytelling.¹¹ To achieve that aim, the understanding needs to be built without initial recourse to the aesthetic judgements by which prescriptive literary criticism maintains its gatekeeping, and without losing sight of the spectres of marketisation currently stalking the humanitites.

Method

With the survey's aim in mind, of taking a first step to understanding general-market reading of fiction in terms of gains, potential readers were asked a series of questions about what they hoped

¹⁰ See research conducted by Torten Pettersson, "Att lära sig något av det som inte är sant: 72 gymnasisters inställning till fiktionellt och dokumentärt berättande" [To learn from what is untrue: the attitudes of 72 senior high school students to fictional and documentary storytelling], in Skans Kersti Nilsson, Olle Nordberg, Torsten Pettersson, Maria Wennerström Wöhrne, Eds, *Litteraturen på undantag?: Unga vuxnas fiktionsläsning i dagens Sverige*, Göteborg: Makadam Förlag, 2015, 63-79 p. Of the ten questions put to seventy-two senior high school students about why they read fiction, answers overwhelmingly gravitated toward "För att få vila och avkoppling; För att uppleva verklighetsflykt; För att bli road och underhållen" [To get rest and relaxation; to experience a break from reality; to be amused and entertained] and to some extent "För att uppleva spänning och skräck" [to experience excitement and terror]. Translation by the author.

¹¹ See Jackson, Michael, *The Politics of Storytelling: variations on a theme by Hannah Arendt* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press: 2013).

they would gain from the item they had just purchased, on leaving a bookshop. The approach was largely quantitative with a small element of qualitative analysis.

Online retail was felt to be beyond the scope of the project. Online retail has its own dynamic, which would be best gauged, as early indicators suggest, through a comparative approach.¹² In addition, browsing is far-less restricted online compared to a high street shop and much online reading takes place without purchase. The availability of *gratis* content online would not allow the survey to concentrate on readers' commitment to a book-purchase that bricks-and-mortar shopping invites.

Strictly speaking, the sample is not representative of UK book-buying readers. The locations were not randomly selected from a list of all possible UK book shops, and neither were purchasing customers randomised across seasonal or weekly variations. The sample is what statisticians call a convenience sample. However, a good element of randomisation is present, as the interviewers volunteered their services and self-selected the location, while respondents randomly volunteered their data.

Fifteen student interviewers conducted the survey: ten from Bournemouth University (BU) and five from the University of Bedfordshire (UB). Bournemouth university interviewers were recruited by an email, sent across a number of undergraduate and post graduate programmes within the Media School, selected on a first-come first-served basis. Recruitment at Bedfordshire was by general enquiry among the student body by academics involved. Interviews took place throughout October and early November 2014, with a deadline of 12 November 2014, to avoid a skew to results from the influence of Christmas.

Each interviewer self-selected a high street book shop in their home town or a town with which they were familiar. Two stipulations were made to focus on general-market opportunity costs: i) that the bookshop should be a general trade bookshop and neither a specialist niche bookshop (such as military, games, antique or collectors) nor a newsagents or supermarket that also sold books; and ii) that central London would not be suitable due to its unrepresentative concentration of book retail around Charing Cross Road, Soho and Bloomsbury.

Locations were spread widely across England and Wales, with a total of 15 locations used (see appendix xxx), from Preston and Manchester in the North, Bournemouth in the South, Cardiff in the West and Canterbury in the East. Some locations were found either to no-longer have a

¹² See Weedon, Alexis, "In Real Life: Book Covers in the Internet Bookstore", in Mathews, Nicole and Nickanne Moody, eds, *Judging a Book by its Covers: fans, publishers, designers and the marketing of fiction*, (Aldershot, Ashgate: 2007) pp. 117–128

designated general-trade bookshop or too small a footfall to be suitable – a sad reflection of the difficulties currently faced by the off-line sector – and for such reasons Mansfield and Newport (Wales), were de-selected in favour of Nottingham and Cardiff respectively.

A sample of 559 responses was gathered, from a target of 750 potential interviewees: involving 15 student interviewers responsible for 50 questionnaire sheets each. The valid percentage of female respondents was 54.8, and of male 43.3 percent, with 1.8 percent preferring not to indicate gender (267, 211, 9; and 72 omitted answers). All interviewees were over 16 years of age, the oldest self-declaring at 75 plus (see appendix): 30 percent were from the youngest age group 16–24. Each participant was approached at random by the interviewer on leaving the bookshop and asked to complete the questionnaire. Only participants who had completed a purchase were asked to take part.

The largest group of respondents by age group was the 16–24 group (30.0%), twice that of 25–34 (15.4%). The smallest was the 75+ group (3.1%) and 65–74 (7.8%) group. It may be that younger readers buy significantly more books, but the explanation may equally be that younger readers were more responsive to younger interviewers and more willing to complete questionnaires. However, when questioned post-survey collectively, interviewers were unable to establish any definitive bias in responsiveness between older and younger book buyers.

As the sole major surviving retail book chain on UK high streets, it was unsurprising that the majority of shops were branches of Waterstones; meaning any centralised buying policy at Waterstones might influence results. However, with Waterstones' near-monopoly on high-street book retail, their stock largely represents the overall stock of high street books. Furthermore, only a small range of the total of 490 titles (559 sample with 69 incomplete) were purchased more than once: 1 title purchased 12 times (*Gone Girl*), 1 purchased 5 times (*The Empty Throne*), 3 purchased 4 times (*Want You Dead*, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, *Leaving Time*), 8 purchased 3 times, and 19 purchased 2 times, with the remaining being single purchases. These titles would need to be matched with bestseller lists in sources such as *The Bookseller*, to determine whether any discrepancy has been exhibited by Waterstone's buying policy, compared to popular purchases from other retailers. Other chains featured in the survey included *The Works*. Overall, the indication is of a very long tail, where the central high point consists of merely 12 purchases.

The questionnaire design was compatible with SNAP technology, processed to SPSS format. A professional market research company, Market Research Group (MRG) at BU assisted in technical aspects, including formatting and slight amendments to the wording of questions.

Respondents were asked a series of multiple choice questions, with an option for additional qualitative answers in the ‘other’ response box. Unlike the BML survey, respondents were allowed only one response to each question: forcing a definitive response. It was felt that multiple responses in this case would produce complex results: the concern being that the need to interpret those results would threaten the absence of personal bias required by a phenomenological hermeneutic approach; thus skewing the interpretation along lines of established cultural assumptions about ‘quality’ and popular literature.

One questionnaire was filled out for each purchase, some respondents offering to fill out several questionnaires for several purchases. The questions aim to reveal both the readers’ self-interpretation of desires as well as a suggestion about the social culture of reading. The questions were divided into three sections: first to establish what was bought and for whom Q1–2; second to establish the gains readers believed they would obtain, from fiction in Qs 3A–3B, and, by way of a comparison, for other genres in Qs 4A–4B; then thirdly by questions about self perception in relation to other readers, for both fiction and non-fiction in Qs, 3C–E and Qs 4C–E, along with simple Qs (Qs 5–8) on buying habits and demographics.

Finally, the collated results are intended only to be indicative of readers’ behavioural choices. Sociological surveys of this type, compared to, say, clinical surveys for life sciences, involve less risk should the results be skewed. However, for the current survey margins between possible answers were more-than generous and the risk of conflicting results minimal – for example the overwhelming purchases of fiction (60.6 %) compared to the second-best-selling genre, biography and autobiography (6.0 %) – thereby providing convincing results. For the current survey, the latest figures for overall population of England and Wales are 56,567,796, of which the population aged over 15 is 46,564,345.¹³ A sample of 559 implies that the results are representative of a total population aged 15 and over (46.6 m) within $\pm 4.14\%$ at the 95% confidence level (i.e. there is only 1 chance in 20 of the margin of error contained within the results being greater than 4.14 %). (<http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>) Overall, then, a degree of confidence about the generalizability of the survey was felt to be warranted.

¹³ See Office for national statistics: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-322718>

RESULTS

PART I – WHAT IS GAINED AND WHAT DELIVERS?

QUESTIONS 1-3B/4B.

Headline – Fiction is the major delivery mechanism for private gains from book purchase and the justification for opportunity costs in competing items and services.

Purchases made by buyers are for their own use, to the extent of 65%.¹⁴ Since gains that buyers expect are for personal private use, as opposed to gifted altruism, the extent of self gain in bookshop purchases becomes clear.

84.4 % of all purchases were of books. The most popular competing items from the bookshop included calendars (at 0.9 %) and (at 0.2% and below), bluetack, cards (birthday), diaries, specific branded products (Harry Potter emblems), tape, mugs, puzzles and games and general stationary. The private gains buyers expected, unsurprisingly, were expected to be delivered by books.

Overwhelmingly, the top purchase in UK high street bookshops is still fiction. At 60% compared to the next-largest genre, 6.0 % for biography and autobiography, fiction is still what draws customers to the bookshop, and justifies the opportunity costs of not purchasing other goods provided by competing high street services. Approximately a third more self-declared female respondents expected gains from fiction compared to male respondents (180 to 108: 62.5% to 37.5%).

Q. 1 What have you just bought? Book (title/author) Other.

Q.2 Who is your purchase for? Myself; Another adult; A Child.

Q.3. What genre would you call your book? (see below)

Who is your purchase for?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
A child	82	14,7	15,6	15,6
An other adult	101	18,1	19,2	34,9
Myself	342	61,2	65,1	100,0
Total	525	93,9	100,0	

¹⁴ All percentages unless otherwise indicated refer to the valid percentage.

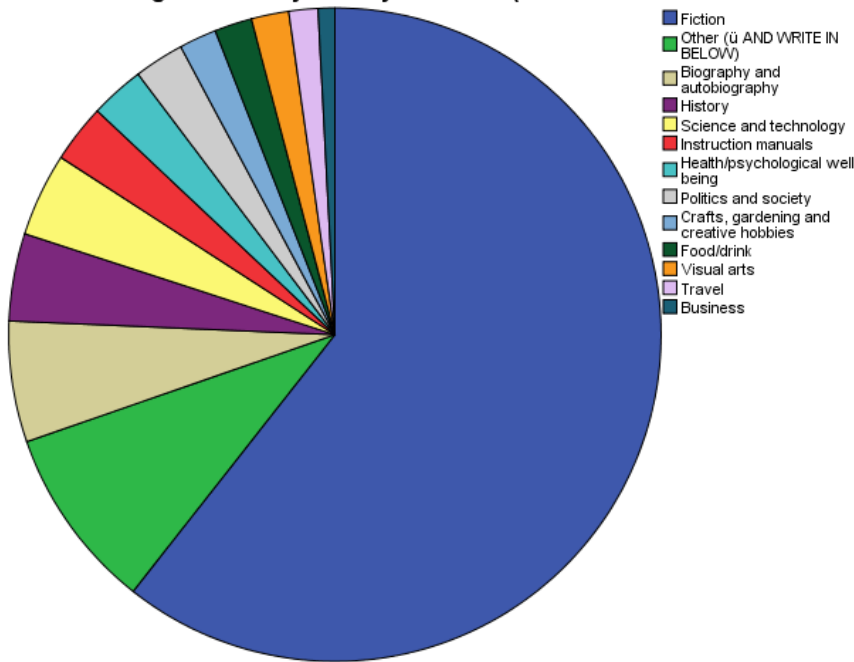
Missing	System	34	6,1	
Total		559	100,0	



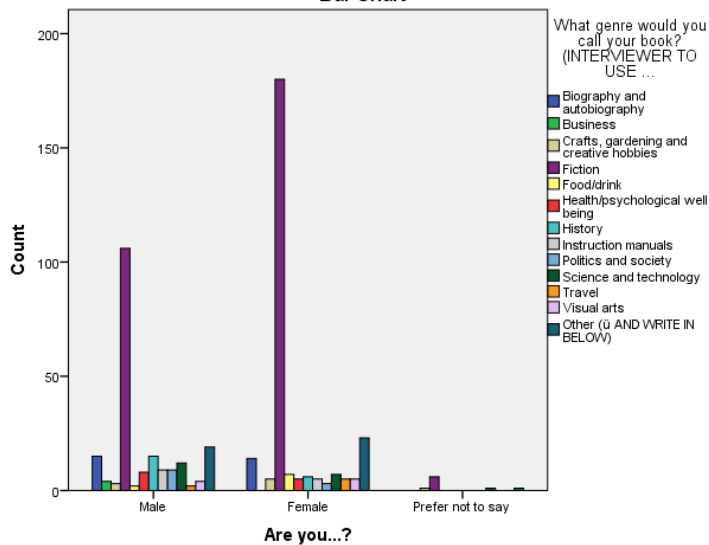
What genre would you call your book?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Fiction	294	52,6	60,6	60,6
	Other (WRITE IN BELOW)	44	7,9	9,1	69,7
	Biography and autobiography	29	5,2	6,0	75,7
	History	21	3,8	4,3	80,0
	Science and technology	20	3,6	4,1	84,1
	Instruction manuals	14	2,5	2,9	87,0
	Health/psychological well being	13	2,3	2,7	89,7
	Politics and society	12	2,1	2,5	92,2
	Crafts, gardening and creative hobbies	9	1,6	1,9	94,0
	Food/drink	9	1,6	1,9	95,9
	Visual arts	9	1,6	1,9	97,7
	Travel	7	1,3	1,4	99,2
	Business	4	,7	,8	100,0
	Total	485	86,8	100,0	
Missing	System	74	13,2		
Total		559	100,0		

What genre would you call your book? (INTERVIEWER TO USE ...



Bar Chart



The choice of the term ‘fiction’ was preferred that would avoid interference effects caused by the introduction of hyponymic expressions such as tragedy/comedy, realist novel/fantasy novel, and the category of ‘Literature’ itself. Poetry was not included as a separate entry because of projected low levels of purchase. Use of the option ‘Other’ (9.1 valid %) would allow for poetry to be included as a separate entry. As such, the ‘Other’ option noted 20 categories, including ‘romantic novel’ (0.4%), which would normally be included under fiction, educational and textbooks (1.3%), which

would be included under non-fiction, alongside ‘crime’ (0.2%), animals (0.2%), humour (0.2%), ‘Photos of shaking puppies’ (0.2%), and no volumes of poetry.

QUESTIONS 3A–3B [Fiction]

Headline – The gains that readers hope from their fiction are entertainment, escape and relaxation. Very few read fiction for an intellectual challenge or for an aesthetic experience. Readers appear far more concerned with being ‘entertained’ than with intense absorption, maintaining a relative distance to both the reading material and the ‘mind of the author’.

Buyers focus on plot to provide the main source of gain. Their interest is in character but not in the manner of a psychologist; instead preferring to read about what the world does to people and what they do to each other. This suggests buyers enjoy exploring how the world may or may not conform to a given conception of order.

Q3A. What do you hope you (or the receiver) will gain MOST from your fiction? The gains that readers hope from their fiction are ‘amusement and entertainment’ (28.8%), ‘relaxation’ (18%), and ‘an escape into another world’ (14.9%) (totalling 61.7%). The next-largest gain was ‘emotional involvement’, surprisingly low at 7.5%, equal with ‘the thrill of suspense and/or terror’ (7.1%). From this, it seems that elements of suspense and emotional intensity are seen hyponymically as an after-effect of entertainment, rather than a primary gain. This may suggest a commodity-reading public that is able to maintain an ironic distance to its reading material, retaining a greater degree of self-determination (in respect of interpretation) than would be expected were the primary gain emotional absorption.

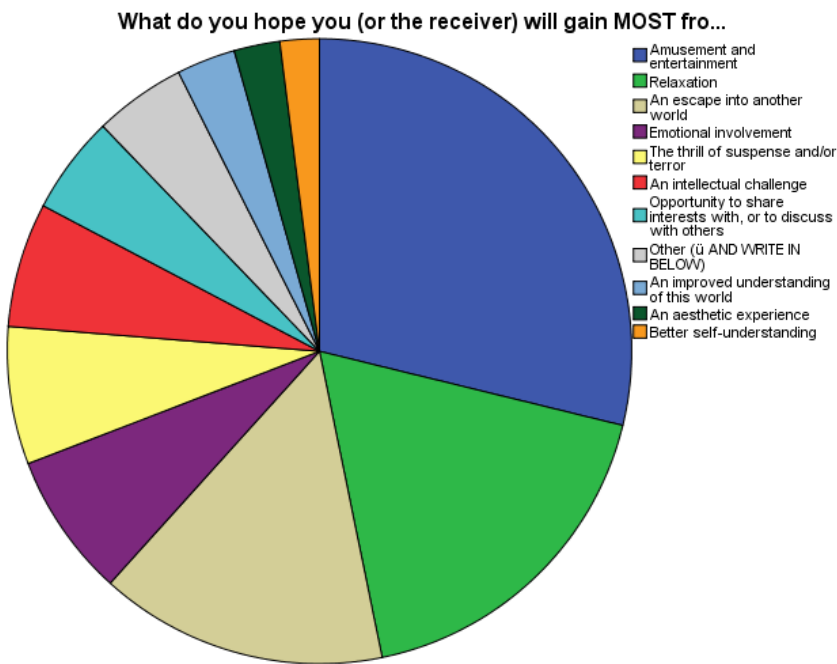
The ‘Other’ option comprised 11 categories, each with a frequency of 1, except ‘Improve English Language’ (frequency 2), and included ‘for teaching’ (0.2%), ‘improvement of my own writing’ (0.2%), ‘religious aesthetic experience’ (0.2%), and ‘pass time’ (0.2%). These entries could be subsumed into several of the categories provided.

On a par with comparatively low ‘emotional involvement’ and ‘suspense’ is ‘an intellectual challenge’ (6.4%), over twice that recorded for ‘an aesthetic experience’ (2.4%). It is no surprise that the gains sought conventionally by critical literary studies are not shared by the retail book public but the extent of the discrepancy is: 8.8% compared to 61.7%. Within the orbit of critical literary studies, however, the data suggests those literary values are instrumental – ‘a better self

understanding’ (2.0%), ‘an improved understanding of this world’ (3.1%) (totalling 5.1%) – and shy away from intrinsic aesthetic pleasures of pure formalism. Taken together, the gains that chime with critical literary values amount to 13.9%, or, if the sample were representative, ca. 6.5 million readers of the UK population over 15; comparable with the total populations of Denmark or Finland. Such a demographic more-than justifies continued investments in reading solely on critical literary terms (added to which are the literary-reading experiences acquired beyond the commodity cultural frame). However, it is still remarkable how little gain is perceived by retail-book readers from a literary critical approach compared to ‘entertainment’. The results indicate where any sociology of literature centred on reception should focus its attention.

What do you hope you (or the receiver) will gain MOST from your fiction?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Amusement and entertainment	85	15,2	28,8	28,8
	Relaxation	53	9,5	18,0	46,8
	An escape into another world	44	7,9	14,9	61,7
	Emotional involvement	22	3,9	7,5	69,2
	The thrill of suspense and/or terror	21	3,8	7,1	76,3
	An intellectual challenge	19	3,4	6,4	82,7
	Opportunity to share interests with, or to discuss with others	15	2,7	5,1	87,8
	Other	14	2,5	4,7	92,5
	An improved understanding of this world	9	1,6	3,1	95,6
	An aesthetic experience	7	1,3	2,4	98,0
	Better self-understanding	6	1,1	2,0	100,0
	Total	295	52,8	100,0	
Missing	System	264	47,2		
Total		559	100,0		



Q3B What will you (or the receiver) find MOST rewarding? [from Fiction] Convincingly, the element of fiction's form from which readers expect the most gains is plot (40.4%). With just over half that score, the next most effective delivery mechanism is character (23.8%). It is worth remembering that classic narratology regards plot and character as interdependent. Plot is more than simply the series of story elements in temporal sequence (*fabula*) and emerges, rather, from a meeting between *fabula* and character: the doing is done to or by someone, who does something to someone else; and the choice of action (including speech) reveals the character's morals and dispositions.¹⁵ However, given that two distinct options were available, readers' expectations of gain emphasised the ordering of sequential events, rather than characterisation that plot can achieve. It is tempting to speculate on how far such gain relies on the suspense between order disrupted and order restored, suggesting an element of satisfaction in seeing the workings of (in)justice. But what can be inferred is that the concept of plot requires readers accepting the *possibility* of the world subject to rational order. If that is true, then the entertainment derived, in part, results from watching how that order does or fails to unfold.

On a cross-tab of Q3B with gender, it appears that almost twice as many self-declaring females expected most from plot compared to character (40 to 78); whereas male respondents were reported at 27 and 37 respectively. Given the interdependence of event and character, it is not

¹⁵ Abrams, p.224.

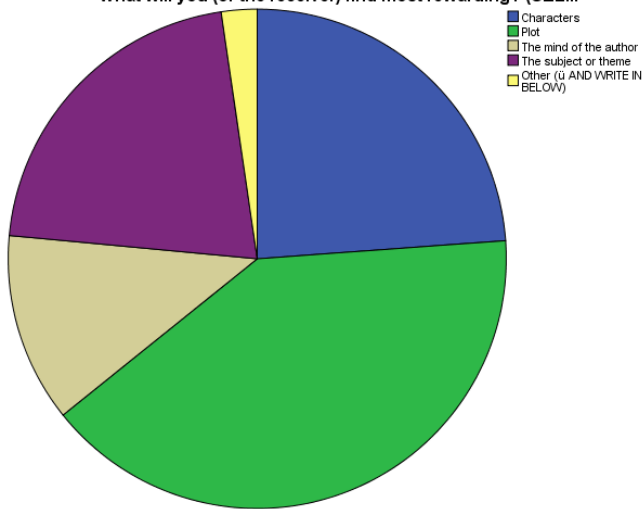
possible to say anything conclusive about male and female expectations from plot and character but it does seem surprising that male respondents should have relatively higher expectations from character.

Following plot and character is ‘subject or theme’ (21.2%); then with roughly half that score ‘Mind of the author’ (12.3%); and finally ‘Other’ (2.3%), which included ‘everything’ (frequency 1), and ‘setting’ (frequency 1). Subject or theme is of equivalent significance to character, and plays an important role as a delivery mechanism. What is of diminished importance, however, relative to expressive critical theory and interests in authorial intention, is the mind of the author. Only ca. 12% of readers hoped to gain something from a closer relationship to the way the author thinks. Clearly, if the gains justifying opportunity costs are not derived from a sense of intellectual quality sited with an author-figure, it is difficult to maintain a theory of reception based on intellectual transmission between author and reader, within the retail frame. The data makes no comment directly on the author figure as a source of gain, either as a brand value or as an inter-personal relationship. It does, however, comment on that part of the author-reader relationship that has to do with a transfer of knowledge. The ironic distance to reading material noticed with comparatively low levels of emotional absorption, in Q3A, would seem to transfer to the reader’s relationship with an author’s intellectual prowess.

What will you (or the receiver) find most rewarding?

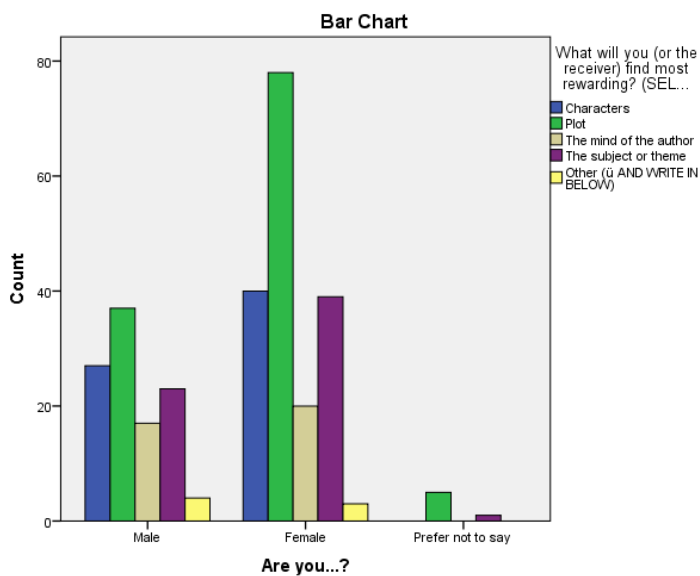
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Characters	72	12,9	23,8	23,8
Plot	122	21,8	40,4	64,2
The mind of the author	37	6,6	12,3	76,5
The subject or theme	64	11,4	21,2	97,7
Other	7	1,3	2,3	100,0
Total	302	54,0	100,0	
Missing System	257	46,0		
Total	559	100,0		

What will you (or the receiver) find most rewarding? (SEL...



Gender and what provides gains [Fiction] Cross Tab.

		What will you (or the receiver) find most rewarding?.					Total
		Character s	Plot	The mind of the author	The subject or theme	Other	
Are you...?	Male	27	37	17	23	4	108
	Female	40	78	20	39	3	180
	Prefer not to say	0	5	0	1	0	6
Total		67	120	37	63	7	294



QUESTIONS 4A–4B [Non- Fiction]

Headline – The gains of non-fiction, while relatively more instrumental than fiction, are nevertheless focussed on amusement and entertainment. This would seem to confirm that entertainment and relaxation is the primary gain of all retailed books across both fiction and non-fiction: a benefit latent in commodified print culture.

‘Entertainment’ requires a thick description beyond the scope of this survey.

Q4A What do you hope you (or the receiver) will gain MOST from your book? [Non-Fiction]

If very few read fiction for an intellectual challenge or for an aesthetic experience, for non-fiction the figures are less emphatic but still weighted towards amusement and entertainment’ (20.2%), and ‘relaxation’ (8.2%) (totalling 28.4%). Relative to fiction, there is an expected emphasis on the more instrumental gains of ‘more information of the subject’ (16.9%), ‘self-improvement’ (15.3%) and ‘an intellectual challenge’ (12%). The option of ‘Other’ culled 4 responses (each of frequency 1), comprising ‘enjoy a good read’, ‘gift’, ‘practice test paper’ and ‘updated book’.

Respondents chose not to emphasise exploratory reading: ‘the thrill of discovering something new’ produced only 5.5 % (frequency 10). Given that readers could have their intellectual curiosity accounted for in ‘more information on the subject’, it is interesting to note the extent to which respondents opted to not self-identify as having a deficit of experience or being in need of a thrill of the new. The predominant self-image was more sober and self-contained. Only 2.2 % bought non-fiction for a ‘heightened commitment to the subject’. Again, the sense of a more intense emotional commitment to a given subject was far less in evidence than the desire for comparatively less immersive forms of amusement and relaxation.

That entertainment and relaxation is still relatively high requires comment, in that we would expect the information content of non-fiction to be paramount compared to the pleasures gained through that ‘content’s’ delivery. This would seem to confirm that entertainment and relaxation is the primary gain of all retailed books across both fiction and non-fiction: a benefit latent in commodified print culture. If a particular bookish configuration of ‘entertainment’, therefore, out-competes the identities and other gains provided by rival goods such as fashion and furnishings, it may mean that bookish ‘entertainment’ is more complex than first thought. Hyponymically, the entertainment derived through books may comprise the personal encouragement, guidance, intellectual insight, and remedies against loneliness speculated on at the beginning of this survey,

but delivered as a mode of relaxing entertainment that allows for the ironic distance and self determination suggested by Q3A and 3B. So if entertainment provided by books can justify the opportunities costs of other High Street offerings, it suggests that the entertainment deserves a far thicker description than currently adopted by formalist literary-critical studies.

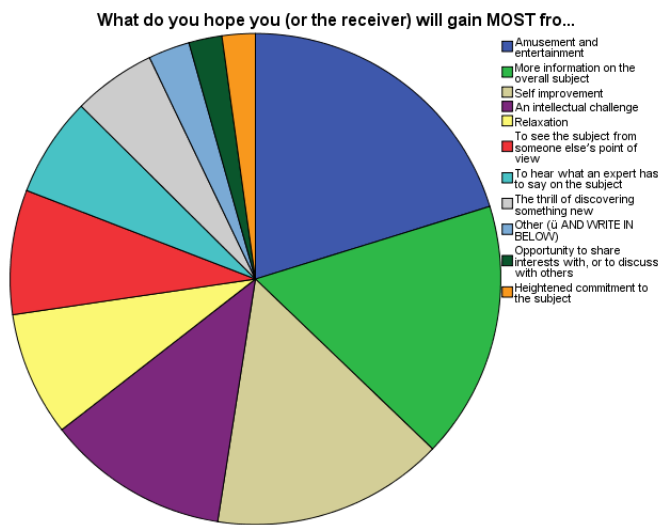
Q4B What will you (or the receiver) find most rewarding? [Non-Fiction]

By far, ‘the subject or theme’ (40.1%) was what respondents turned to for maximum gain. In contrast, ‘the facts’ provided a return of only 28.3%. It may be that factual content is supplied through other channels such as online encyclopedia or via newsfeeds but, counter-intuitively, when behaving as book-buyers of non-fiction most readers aim for a combination of entertainment and subject. The option ‘people involved in the subject’, corresponding to ‘character’ for fiction, polled only 13.9%; in the same order as ‘the mind of the author’ (12.3%). It would seem, again, that some of the same trends exhibited for fiction are found in non-fiction in its primary emphasis not being on character. Biography and autobiography comprised 6% among other genre, and history 3,8, so an interest in people and their (past) actions is evident, but it seems that buyers of both fiction and non-fiction are not *primarily* interested in other people, but rather in personalised subjects and events. The relationship of a buyer to her book is not that of a psychologist, but an anthropologist.

What do you hope you (or the receiver) will gain MOST from your book? [Non-Fiction]

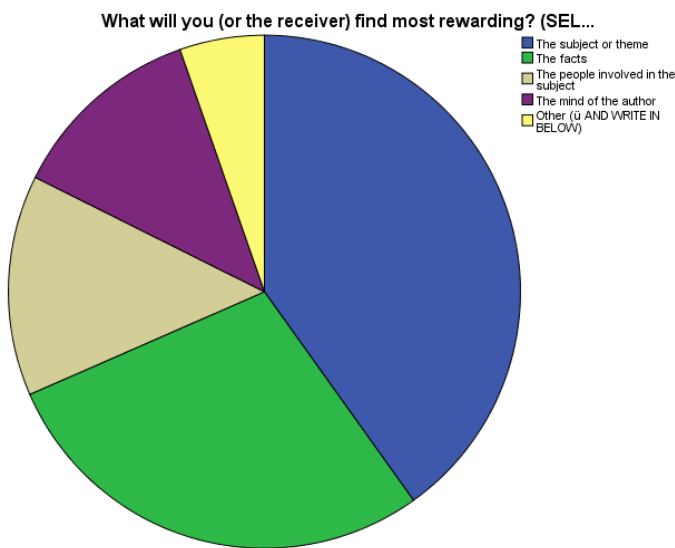
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Amusement and entertainment	37	6,6	20,2	20,2
More information on the overall subject	31	5,5	16,9	37,2
Self improvement	28	5,0	15,3	52,5
An intellectual challenge	22	3,9	12,0	64,5
Relaxation	15	2,7	8,2	72,7
To see the subject from someone else’s point of view	15	2,7	8,2	80,9
To hear what an expert has to say on the subject	12	2,1	6,6	87,4
The thrill of discovering something new	10	1,8	5,5	92,9
Other	5	,9	2,7	95,6

	Opportunity to share interests with, or to discuss with others	4	,7	2,2	97,8
	Heightened commitment to the subject	4	,7	2,2	100,0
	Total	183	32,7	100,0	
Missing	System	376	67,3		
Total		559	100,0		



What will you (or the receiver) find most rewarding? [Non-Fiction]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	The subject or theme	75	13,4	40,1	40,1
	The facts	53	9,5	28,3	68,4
	The people involved in the subject	26	4,7	13,9	82,4
	The mind of the author	23	4,1	12,3	94,7
	Other	10	1,8	5,3	100,0
	Total	187	33,5	100,0	
Missing	System	372	66,5		
Total		559	100,0		



PART II – GAINS BETWEEN READERS

QUESTIONS 3C–E/4C–E.

Q3C/4C: Do you think you (or the receiver is) typical of the readers of this fiction/book

Q3D/4D: Would you be interested in what other readers have thought of this fiction/book?

Q3E/4E: Once the book has been read, do you think you could easily guess the identity of a typical reader?

Headline – a probable gain from buying books is a sense of relationship to a collective of other readers. That the relationship might be affirmative or antagonistic is secondary to the recognition of collectivism itself. Book buying, therefore, enables processes of socialisation.

There is no evidence to suggest that books are expected to deliver concrete judgements, either about what other people consider to be the proper use of books, or about how other people have conceived their identities. There is evidence, however, that suggests independence of mind among readers, coupled to openness for complexity in the lives of other people.

In reply to the question 3C/4C, ‘Do you think you are (or the receiver is) typical of the readers of this fiction and non-fiction’, 79,6% of respondents said yes and 20,4% said no for fiction, and

73.8% said yes and 26.2% said no for non-fiction. Most book buyers believe they are part of a collective market of like-minded readers. Poachers, to use de Certeau's phrase, some 20–25% of readers, read within the same collective as self-identifying outsiders. It is not possible to draw conclusions from the data about books and identity formation, since typicality is not directly linked to identity. 'Typical readers' may refine their self-image through reading, and non-typical readers may allow their self-image to be more aggressively tested. It is a weakness of the survey that there was no third option of 'do not know', which would have suggested a percentage of buyers who read with little conception of a collective market of fellow readers. What the data does suggest, however, is a belief in personal congruity among the majority; that readers mostly buy what they think is appropriate to a self-image they believe they share with others. (That is not to say that a text cannot still have a dramatic effect on a reader's self image – as reception history attests – but the tendency, according to the data, will be towards the belief in a fellowship of like-minded, dramatically-effected readers.) While not conclusive, there is a suggestion that book buying delivers a sense of relationship to a collective of other readers, whether as an insider or as an outsider, and as such that relationship indicates processes of socialisation.

Of the overall valid response, 66.8% of readers of fiction and 59.1% of readers of non-fiction said they would be interested in what other readers have thought of the book: Q3D/4D. The result leaves around a third of fiction and non-fiction readers uninterested in the opinions of others; suggesting either a degree of self-centeredness or, more optimistically, an independence of mind. The slightly smaller figure for fiction suggests an increased willingness to engage with the opinions of others, when reading behaviour addresses fiction relative to non-fiction. For the two-third majority, the relationship to other readers is important; but for around less than half of all readers, the relationship between buyer and book is formed less emphatically between reader and reader than between reader and text. That the results for readers' interests in the opinions of others is not conclusive does not necessarily preclude a book's ability to contribute to processes of socialisation, however, since this can still take place in the reader's relationship to the (character-populated) text and in the imagined relationship to the collective of readers.

Since almost twice as many female respondents bought fiction than male, 180 to 108 - 62.5% to 37.5%, compared to 85 to 102 - 45% to 54% for female and male for non-fiction, it follows that female readers will be more likely to be interested in the opinions of other readers of fiction, than men in the opinions of other readers of non-fiction. For male non-fiction readers, the

relationship to other readers is relatively unimportant; for female readers of fiction it is. Furthermore, given that entertainment is the central gain of both fiction and non-fiction, it follows that female readers overall are more interested in how others readers constitute ‘entertainment’: again supporting the need for a thick description of that term.

Questions 3E/4E were intended to ascertain whether readers expected their purchases to provide a learning experience in terms of understanding other people, framed as a question of typicality: “Once the book has been read, do you think you could easily guess the identity of a typical reader?” By comparing to the typicality self-identified by purchasers, posed in Q3C/4C, the results would indicate estimations of ability to judge typicality *once* the book has been read: the book thus being expected to deliver a greater understanding of what constitutes a ‘typical reader’. Contrary to expectations, the results showed expectations of a decrease in the ability to predict typicality: for fiction, 79.6% fell to 56%, falling from almost 80% to just over a half, and for non-fiction 73.8% fell to 64%. It may be that the results merely indicate a badly phrased question, which is perfectly possible. Interviewers did report a level of confusion over Q 3E/4E among respondents. Indeed, there may be neither an easy correlation between self-identifying typicality and indentifying typicality in others, nor a role for reading as a bridging activity, of the kind identified by Hannah Arendt. Reading might not provide a better insight into attitudes of other readers.

However, while a comfortable majority did expect books to enable an accurate judgement, the results for fiction (79.6 to 56) are significant enough to require comment. It may be that a book brings with it an expectation for the reader to question the notion of typicality itself. In this case, the reading experience provides greater complexity, seen as a gain. Far from reducing complexity, fiction is seen as a provision that will increase complexity through the reader’s interpretation. Any ‘understanding’ purchasers look for may not be of a reduced, simple kind.

Q3C: Do you think you (or the receiver is) typical of the readers of this fiction

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	234	41,9	79,6	79,6
	No	60	10,7	20,4	100,0
	Total	294	52,6	100,0	
Missing	System	265	47,4		
Total		559	100,0		

Q4C: Do you think you (or the receiver is) typical of the readers of this book

[non-fiction]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	138	24,7	73,8	73,8
	No	49	8,8	26,2	100,0
	Total	187	33,5	100,0	
Missing	System	372	66,5		
Total		559	100,0		

Q3D: Would you be interested in what other readers have thought of this

fiction?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	199	35,6	66,8	66,8
	No	99	17,7	33,2	100,0
	Total	298	53,3	100,0	
Missing	System	261	46,7		
Total		559	100,0		

Q4D: Would you be interested in what other readers have thought of this book?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	110	19,7	59,1	59,1
	No	76	13,6	40,9	100,0
	Total	186	33,3	100,0	
Missing	System	373	66,7		
Total		559	100,0		

Q3E: Once the book has been read, do you think you could easily guess the identity of a typical reader?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	167	29,9	56,0	56,0
	No	131	23,4	44,0	100,0
	Total	298	53,3	100,0	

Missing	System	261	46,7	
Total		559	100,0	

Q4E: Once the book has been read, do you think you could easily guess the identity of a typical reader?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	120	21,5	64,9	64,9
	No	65	11,6	35,1	100,0
	Total	185	33,1	100,0	
Missing	System	374	66,9		
Total		559	100,0		

CONCLUSION

If the corpus achieved can be considered to be representational of UK book buyers, then the current survey makes a first tentative step in articulating reader's attitudes to the books they purchase, and in establishing grounds for a theory of (political) reading within the dominant frame of economics.

On the high street, books out-compete rival products and services because of the combinations of unique gains readers believe they provide. The primary gain is entertainment: a form of amusement and a means of relaxation, but not one that is emotionally absorbing or fully immersive. Readers maintain a relative distance to the material they buy, and sustain a good level of intellectual independence. They are also relatively uninterested in the mind of the author, in what the author 'has to say', than the entertainment effect provided by the purchase. Very few read fiction for an intellectual challenge or for an aesthetic experience: to exercise the 'sustained and unusual seriousness' prescribed by important approaches in literary criticism. Although this specific form of entertainment that readers seek is the primary gain across both purchased fiction and non-fiction, it is best delivered through fiction; and on the whole female buyers are more attune to its benefits. Buyers are primarily interested in their relationship to the world, rather than their direct relationships to other people. However, that imagined world is densely populated, by both fictional characters and other readers, so the preference is to gain insight into what the world does to people and what people do to each other. The interest is anthropological rather than psychological. This suggests buyers enjoy exploring how the world may or may not conforms to any given sense of

order, and how this might impact on their own behaviour, include their self identity. For such operations to be meaningfully included under the term 'entertainment', a much thicker definition of entertainment is required. Additionally, through buying books, readers explore their position as part of a collective, as either outsiders or insiders, but still participating in or, rather, creating a collective market. The relationships, therefore, between buyers and their populated fictional worlds, and between the same buyers and other imagined readers, both constitute processes of socialization. These processes of socialization delivered as a mode of relaxation and entertainment are perhaps the greatest gain that books provide, and in a particularly refined form provided by fiction.

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