

1 Introduction

Readers rarely identify bestsellers as their favourite type of book to read. Most readers, however, have an opinion about what a bestseller is, and, consciously or not, that opinion informs how they choose their next read. Consider the last time you saw, heard, or read the term *bestseller*. Maybe you were walking past tables piled with books in a bookstore and a cover sticker caught your eye. Perhaps you were waiting in line at the supermarket next to a rack of paperbacks with a bestsellers shelf label. You might have noticed the recurring image of a book cover while browsing your social media feeds. Possibly a friend passed along a recent read featured on several bestseller lists. Whatever the situation, your decision to ignore a bestseller or to take note, to click on a post or to swipe past it, suggests something about your reading habits, preferences, and selection practices. Adult readers' attitudes to the term *bestseller*, particularly bestselling fiction in English, and their relationships with anglophone reading recommendation cultures are the subject of this Element.

Our thesis is simple. Readers play a crucial role in maintaining the success and reputation of bestselling fiction. Without readers buying, borrowing, and recommending books, sales, library loans, and reader-generated reviews cannot exist in the quantities required to put a newly published book on a bestseller list or to bring an older, backlist title into the physical spaces and onto the virtual platforms where many readers go to discover books. What is more complex and interesting is how readers interact with the culture constructed around bestsellers by agents in the book industry and mass media, by social media influencers, and by other readers. In this short Element we present an analysis of original research that we pursued across three years (2019–21). While the commission to write about 'reading bestsellers' came with certain parameters – most significantly the focus on bestselling fiction in English – the focus on recommendation culture and the multimodal reader arose from our preliminary investigations into readers' understanding of bestsellers. In particular, readers' use of information about bestselling fiction foregrounded their position in post-digital book cultures, so that the question shaping our research became: what is it like to be a reader, not just in a transmedia age, but in an era when old and new media, on- and offline practices, coexist?

The main sections of *Reading Bestsellers* offer a snapshot in time of readers' opinions and actions that conveys some of the qualities of that experience.

We have also attempted to address some of the gaps in anglophone scholarship about contemporary readers and networked reading cultures. For example, rather than focussing on the material that Bookstagram and BookTube influencers publish, we asked them about their motivations, production processes, platform preferences, and sponsorship deals (see Section 3, 'Connecting'). In each phase of the research – quantitative questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with influencers, asynchronous Instagram group with sixteen young adult readers – we sought to elaborate how readers saw themselves as agents within the online and offline processes that generate bestsellers. We also wanted to understand how and why readers who were not influencers use different virtual and non-virtual sources for reading recommendations. We took an iterative approach to each of the phases, employing digital tools that enabled international participation. Of course, we could not address every aspect of contemporary reading cultures and there are skews and under-representation, not least because we conducted the research in English. Some who participated in our research thoughtfully identified its limits. As one reader succinctly wrote, 'The parameters that often make a "bestselling fiction" are not universal' (Momo, Instagram group member, 2021). Other readers in our study demonstrated through their reading practices, and also through their comments, how genre and generation, language and geography, gender, racialization, and class shape how and where readers recommend books. Participants also discussed privileges and structural inequalities operating at local, national, and transnational levels that shape access to books, other media, and the technologies that distribute and deliver them. In doing so, they pushed back against the categories of our research commission into reading bestselling fiction in anglophone markets.

Readers and Bestsellers

Everything is bestselling nowadays. A book is hardly going to be advertised as 'the latest underperforming novel from the author of some books that didn't do well and that you didn't read'. (Anonymous questionnaire respondent, Feb. 2020)

Most readers recognize ‘bestseller’ as a category created by book industry professionals to draw attention to particular books. The overt cynicism expressed by this anonymous respondent represents a view articulated by some of our readers. The category ‘bestseller’ reminds readers that books are commodities, notwithstanding their primary association with it: high-volume sales, or popular genre fiction authored by a highly successful writer (e.g., Lee Childs; Colleen Hoover), or a title that has received multiple literary prizes. As we examine in Section 2, ‘Choosing’, the tension between commerce and culture produces unease for some readers for a variety of reasons. At the very least, *bestseller* appears to be an unreliable signifier. A reader from the third phase of our research articulated this well: ‘the title “bestseller” seems to ascribe some value to the book, so many people trust that if it’s a bestseller, it must be a really good book (but maybe it is not?!)’. Uncertainty about what exactly is being signalled by the bestseller *badge* is the reason many of the participants in our research trust the assessments and reviews of other readers, especially if the recommendation is from a friend.

The *hype* about a work of bestselling fiction may begin with the *buzz* created by publishers milling about at the Frankfurt Book Fair, as vividly described and analysed by Driscoll and Squires (2020). Once the appellation of bestseller is made manifest in material form like a newspaper list, for example, it becomes a powerful paratext that can be used by authors, publishers, and booksellers in the marketing and selling of fiction. Sorenson (2017) conceptualizes this process in terms of ‘positive-feedback market mechanisms ... which can cause a product’s success (or lack thereof) to be self-reinforcing’ (88). But where are readers in this model? Steiner’s (2014) analysis of international megasellers, or ‘titles that sell far more copies than most bestsellers’, is useful in this regard (57). She argues that a bestseller must be ‘understood as part of a complex system in which the particular work of fiction, serendipity, and clever marketing are equally important’ (41). She defines serendipity in this context as readers’ desire to share the experience of reading a text read by many, but calls for more scholarly attention to readers within that ‘complex system’. As Steiner notes, readers’ ideas about what constitutes bestselling fiction and how they use the marketing and other paratexts that surround bestsellers is largely missing from scholarship about bestsellers in English. Critical

attention has been focussed on other issues like defining bestsellers (for a summary, see Wilkins & Bennett 2021, 5–7); deconstructing and critiquing the ways that influential bestseller lists are formulated (e.g., Childress 2011; Miller 2000); or predicting or identifying what factors will produce a bestseller (e.g., Archer & Jocker 2016). Surveys and histories of bestsellers in English tend to highlight books and/or authors rather than readers (e.g., Sutherland 2007). Meanwhile, several recent studies highlight the importance of digital formats, especially ebooks (e.g., McKinnon 2015), or the success of particular audiobooks (Weber 2019) to the creation of bestsellers. Some reception studies of individual bestselling books do analyze what attracts readers to them, helpfully demonstrating how, for example, particular themes and genres engage them (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo 2018). Illouz's (2014) book about the megaseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* is notable for her consideration of the creative role played by readers in the production of the novel because of its genesis as fanfiction.

Illouz also highlights the important relationship between romance and bestsellers in the USA, where, at the time of her study, the genre accounted for nearly half of all mass-market paperback sales (13). Popular fiction genres like crime, romance, and fantasy dominate sales of bestselling fiction in English, regardless of format (Booknet Canada 2022, 18; see also 'Best Sellers – Books – The New York Times'). These genres are also read and enjoyed by many readers who participated in our research, often alongside literary fiction and non-fiction genres (see Section 2, 'Choosing', and Section 4, 'Responding'). Another marker of the success and visibility of popular genres is their remediation and adaptation. As Gelder (2019) points out in his *Element*, 'popular genres are more likely to be adapted more frequently and extensively because they already inhabit a heavily commercialized cultural field. A bestseller already implies a large readership and, especially these days, global circulation' (3). Gelder's attention to the production and popularity of three fantasy series that have been adapted for film and television not only excavates the political economy of trans-media bestsellers but it also underlines the attraction for some readers of an extended immersion in a fictional world. While avid readers may take the approach of 'first the book, then the film', as one of the Instagram group readers expressed it, all readers are consumers not only of books but also of

other media products. In our efforts to examine readers' ideas about and uses of bestselling fiction we conceptualized these opinions and practices as part of engaging with the mediascapes and communication technologies that they were navigating (see Section 4, 'Responding').

The Multimodal Reader 'Cubed'

The reader participating in the reading recommendation culture of the third decade of the twenty-first century is a multimodal reader, or, as we have come to imagine them, multimodal readers 'cubed'. The MMR³s read multimodally in three dimensions in an era when digital and print cultures coexist, when reading materials might be transmedia objects or codex books (but also exist in other formats), and various devices can be used to read them. The MMR³s navigate post-digital culture or 'the messy and paradoxical condition of art and media after digital technology revolutions' (Andersen, Cox & Papadopolous 2014, 5). Rather than signalling the end of a digital era, the post-digital can be considered the 'second (or even third wave)' of digitization 'wherein digital and analogue book technologies exist with simultaneous relevance' (Dane & Weber 2021, 1). For readers with access to these technologies, post-digital book culture represents opportunities for choosing what to read, how or if they connect with other readers, and how they respond to books, other readers, authors, and publishers. The MMR³s act and interact within a mobile, networked, multimedia environment (Fuller 2019). Some of them may be prosumers (Bruns 2008) who create content regularly; others will skim that content, possibly leaving a small trace of their reading act in the form of a 'like' or an emoji depending on the platform and the affordances of the device they are using. Levels and intensities of engagement and participation with networked reading cultures vary according to the readers who were involved in the research for this Element, some of whom have access to online reading recommendation sites and apps but choose not to use them. Not all MMR³s engage with post-digital book cultures in the same way.

As book historians remind us, multimodal reading as a communicative practice is nothing new (Ouvry-Vial 2019). Readers have long been multimodal actors; they engage in modes of communication that are gestural,

visual, audio, spatial, and linguistic (Serafini 2012). Not all modes are used by all readers in all situations. Some communication might be to share an experience of reading face to face (f2f) with a friend or book group, or online through the creation of an Instagram book review. Multimodal modes of communication are also discernible in historical examples of shared reading such as in the reading aloud practices of some nineteenth-century literary societies (McHenry 2002); in domestic settings where a print-literate reader reads aloud to a familial group who may not have the same level of literacy (Ghosh 2003) or, further back in time, during situations of public reading whether religious or secular, for example, in late antiquity (Moorhead 2010). How this multimodality is or was engaged by a reader varies depending on the material form of the reading matter, the reader's abilities, the reader's literacy competencies, and on the absence or presence of an addressee or audience. As this explanation implies, we conceive of both an act of reading and the 'event of reading' (Radway 1991[1984]) as a social process that 'is always a practice embodied in gestures, spaces, and habits' (Chartier 1992, 51). As we have argued elsewhere (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 27–43), these social practices are shaped by what Long (2003) called 'the social infrastructure of reading' (8), which includes the institutions and industries that produce not only reading materials, but also social scripts about the value and purpose of reading.

Echoing Chartier's theorization of reading as a social process, Thomas (2021) describes the digital environment as one where 'reading is increasingly conceived as active and creative, and where embodiment and situatedness are constantly being reconceptualised and redefined' (2). The MMR³ is still a socially situated reader involved in reading as a social practice, but their habits of reading are shaped by a post-digital reality where analogue and digital technologies are often entangled rather than binary opposites. An illustration might be the ways that some readers use their smartphone to read a bestseller list in the digital version of a newspaper like *The NYT* then reserve a print copy of a bestselling novel at their local library, later posting their review on Goodreads using their tablet. Another aspect of the entanglement is the prominence of reader-created visual images of codex books in piles or on shelves in posts on platforms like Instagram, and readers' bodies (sometimes signified by only a hand flipping pages of a book)

appearing in their YouTube videos or TikToks in front of book displays in bookshops. The MMR³ is not necessarily always a content creator in this latter sense, but these practices, the still and moving images, and the bodily gestures of readers form repertoires of multimodal communication that are legible to them.

The Reading Industry and Recommendation Culture

We have conceptualized the agents, institutions, and organizations producing and consuming events, cultural artifacts, and media as part of early twenty-first-century book leisure reading culture as “the reading industry” (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 15–27). Some of the factors that characterized the reading industry of the early 2000s were media convergence, intersecting fields of production, and collaborations between managers working in commercial and not-for-profit agencies. We have also examined how the reading industry was shaped by late capitalism and the neoliberal cultural policies in the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom that promoted ‘the creative economy’ (129–35), consequently putting discursive and political pressure on the cultural industries to undertake the labour of social and community support in the wake of funding cuts to social services (135–8). The ‘business’ of the reading industry as we then defined it was ‘to make leisure reading entertaining’ (18). Mass reading events or broadcast book clubs were among the reading industry’s products. The reader was an active agent within the reading industry in that they were selective about how they participated in events, expressive of various kinds of pleasure (and disappointment), and often had different ideas about the kinds of community that form around a shared experience of book reading (214–42). Today, many of the agents and features of the reading industry are still recognizable from the noughties, but the ubiquity of recommendation culture (Van Dijck 2013, 40), smartphone ownership, and the proliferation of social media platforms where readers might find ‘affinity spaces’ (Gee 2004) or ‘affiliative’ connections (Zappavigna 2011, cited in Thomas 2020, 84–5) are three of the biggest changes to how the reading industry operates.

Not only can publishers connect with readers directly and immediately, in ways they were still struggling to identify during the early 2000s

(Fuller, Rehberg Sedo & Squires 2011), but the more economically powerful houses use complex algorithms to capture data about readers' book choices and reading habits and direct content to them. As Kirchenbaum and Werner (2014) note, 'even a mainstream piece of literary fiction . . . is released into the kind of networked media environment that characterizes our most mundane daily interactions' (425). In the contemporary iteration of the reading industry 'books have become transmedia properties, franchises spanning multiple formats, media channels, and distribution networks' (452). Meanwhile, readers have become more important agents within the reading industry because they consume across various channels, and many also circulate their reviews and opinions within networked communities that are entangled within the structures and technologies of a wider online recommendation culture (Fan et al. 2018; Goodrich & de Mooij 2014). These digital practices are of relevance to any examination of bestsellers, because, as Parnell and Driscoll (2021) observe: 'Bestselling books are entwined with a range of digital practices, users and algorithms, including those on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram; reviews and interviews on blogs, BookTuber channels and below-the-line comments on digital newspaper features. Each of these digital nodes is an internally rich and complex site of reception' (4). When we foreground readers and their actions rather than bestselling books and their reception, as we do in our analysis, we must query how offline recommendation practices relate to digital ones, and we need to problematize the agency readers have within reading recommendation culture.

Readers have more ways of sharing their reading than ever before, and they can create content that influences other readers around the globe, but they must also contend with direct and indirect forms of marketing online, with data harvesting, aggressive algorithms, and data surveillance. This tension between readers' agency as commentators on what they consume, and how those commentaries can be influenced and easily co-opted by for-profit organizations that produce and distribute media, is a recurring concern underpinning our analyses in *Reading Bestsellers*. Readers often perform unpaid and underpaid labour for the publishing industry. For instance, many readers contribute through review posts and through the sharing of

content by reblogging and retweeting to the very hype and buzz that some of them also criticize.

Readers also frequently engage in online recommendation culture by employing fan-like practices. These include the use of emotive language and the expression of their passion for particular books, and also the use of hashtags such as #amreading and #bookstagram. The behaviour that the media industries require of audiences is underlined by Scott (2019), who writes, ‘media industries operating within a convergence context need audiences to be active, to behave like “fans”, but they would prefer prescribed modes of activity that are promotionally beneficial and not ideologically challenging’ (11). It is not only the publishing industry that requires readers to contribute to the reading industry in this way, but also the owners and managers of the social media platforms where readers connect with each other. We might understand the creation of the BookTok Book Club in July 2022 as an example of how the managers of a platform made explicit the already existing (and highly profitable) relationships among BookTokers with millions of followers, the publishing industry, and the networked recommendation culture supported by the features and affordances of TikTok (TikTok 2022).

The cross-media and cross-platform aspects of reading recommendation culture and its role within the contemporary reading industry become more explicit through collaborations between successful influencers and streaming companies. For example, in May 2021, three English-language BookTubers, each of whom had more than 250,000 subscribers, were employed by Netflix to review the television adaptation of the bestselling fantasy series *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo before its launch (Still Watching Netflix 2021). We can understand this event in terms of Murray’s (2011) conceptualization of the ‘adaptation industry’, wherein an existing audience for a book is the target of promotion for a film or television series. We should, however, also consider the practices of each influencer’s followers, the rhetorical and material efforts of the influencers to maintain connection with their communities, and the friendship among influencers that is explicitly referenced by all three participants in the video. Some of these matters are taken up in Section 3, ‘Connecting’. Meanwhile, what about the readers who comment on this video because they trust these

influencers? The intricacies of parasocial relationships online, the types of intimacy that social media affords, and the way that readers pursue their interest in specific writers and genres all demand further critical attention. To do this work, reading studies scholars need to make a turn from the study of reading communities meeting in physical spaces to, in Burek Pierce's (2020) words, 'fans, media, and online communities', in a move that should include a critical consideration of the 'infinite diffusion' of 'social [media] space' (8). In *Reading Bestsellers* we begin to attend to the former within the context of the latter.

While for-profit and for-promotion relationships between the reading industry and recommendation culture may appear to be structured through practices of co-option and commercialization and the avoidance of content and creators who are 'ideologically challenging', fan studies scholars would be the first to remind us to pay attention to the variety of behaviours that occur within fandoms and online reading communities (Busse 2017; Jenkins 1992). For instance, influencers and their followers on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok do not only express their passion for reading and their excitement about specific genres and individual books; many also critique the over-representation of white, middle-class personnel in the English-language publishing industry, and the under-representation of minoritized communities and perspectives in the contemporary fiction that those same companies produce. Two campaigns that began on Twitter, #ownvoices (2015) and #weneeddiversebooks (2014), continue to highlight these issues and have been taken up by influencers and users across platforms. Moreover, some Bookstagrammers, BookTokers, and BookTubers, especially (but not only) those who identify as Black, Indigenous or as a Person of Colour, queer and/or disabled, create content that highlights books by writers from minoritized communities, critique cultural appropriation, and actively discourage their followers from reading the books of writers whose work reproduces racist or ableist and/or heteronormative stereotypes, tropes, and narratives. Since elite white agents have the most power within the reading industry in terms of both economic and cultural capital (So 2021), bestselling fiction in English often reproduces and exhibits the racism, classism, and heteronormativity that pervade many public institutions and commercial organizations as well as online spaces.