MIDDLEMEN:
MAKING LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF MULTIMEDIA CONGLOMERATES

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ABSTRACT

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In the 1980s and 90s, the publishing industry in the United States was transformed by a series of mergers and acquisitions, as long-standing houses were subsumed into international multimedia conglomerates to form what we now know as The Big Five—Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Simon and Schuster. Though conglomeration revolutionized the processes of literary production, scholars have paid little mind to these corporate practices. This dissertation investigates the ways that literature is made today by focusing on the overlooked professionals shaping the field of contemporary literary production: Agents, Editors, Authors, and Distributors. Too often dismissed as mere bureaucratic functionaries, these middlemen are in fact powerful nodes between artist and corporation, and they force us to rethink the category of literary production as a form of corporate creativity. Exploring the influence of middlemen on contemporary literary forms, I blend computational methods, ethnography, literary history, and close reading to model a new method for analyzing the field of literary production. I reveal how these professionals operate as administrators of literary prestige and "corporate taste" today, shaping the form and content of contemporary fiction while providing access to mainstream publication and cultural consecration. I argue that contemporary fiction allegorizes the logic of the marketplace, even while critiquing the neoliberal corporatization of literary production.

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INTRODUCTION

I. "Cat Person"

The most influential piece of fiction in 2017 was a short story published in *The New Yorker:* "Cat Person," by Kristen Roupenian. It was *The New Yorker*'s most-read piece of fiction, a feat for a new writer just out of a top-flight MFA. "Cat Person" was so popular, it became the second-most-read piece published by *The New Yorker* of the entire year, fiction and nonfiction alike—in part due to the most read story, Dylan Farrow's Pulitzer Prize winning report on Harvey Weinstein.[1] A timely story swept up in the momentum of #MeToo, Roupenian's all-too-familiar tale of a bad date that culminates in bad, maybe nonconsensual, sex quickly went viral. Margot, a 20-year-old student, meets thirty something Robert. They flirt via text messages, sending heart-eyed emoji and jokes about their cats. On their date, Margot is not attracted to Robert IRL. Still, she feels that she cannot say 'no' to sex—not because she has been physically coerced, but because she feels it would be unkind and impolite to spurn his advances. The next day, she cuts off the relationship. His text messages predictably become insulting and abusive; the story and the relationship both end unceremoniously: "Whore."

It was the story that launched a thousand think-pieces: "'Cat Person' and the Impulse to Undermine Women's Fiction,"[2] "What Is It About Cat Person? Bad Sex in

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[1] See Deborah Treisman's December 2017 roundup. Also popular were a previously unpublished short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The I.O.U.," Samantha Hunt's "A Love Story," Curtis Sittenfield's "The Prairie Wife," and a story about Billie Holliday by Zadie Smith, "Crazy They Call Me." "Cat Person" also topped *The New Yorker*'s Most Read of 2017 list, that includes both fiction and non-fiction, coming in a close second to Farrow's investigation into Weinstein, and just above Ryan Lizza's explosive, expletive-filled conversation with Anthony Scaramucci.

[2] Garber, Megan. "'Cat Person' and the Tendency to Undermine Women's Fiction." *The Atlantic*. 11 December 2017.

Fiction,"[3] "Our Reaction to 'Cat Person' Shows that We Are Failing As Readers."[4] Soon, a parody Twitter account was launched with the handle Men React to Cat Person (@mencatperson). Students at Yale mounted the "'Cat Person' Symposium."[5] In short, the buzz was total and effectual. Kristen Roupenian, the unknown writer and recent MFA grad, was scooped up by agent Jenni Ferrari-Adler of Union Literary. On the strength of a single story in *The New Yorker*, Ferrari-Adler negotiated a two-book deal for Roupenian with Scout Press (a subsidiary of Simon & Schuster). Soon, *The New York Times* was breathlessly reporting Roupenian's seven-figure advance. Though not unheard of for a short-story collection, such an advance is typically awarded to a different class of writer—a writer like Tom Hanks, who published his debut short story collection in 2017.[6] And while Hanks may have moved from Hollywood studio to Big Five, Roupenian is set to reverse the trajectory; her as-yet-unwritten horror script, *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies,* was purchased on spec by A24.[7] "Cat Person"—its publication, the ensuing frenzy, its inauguration into the Big Five—crystallizes what it means to make literature now.

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Middlemen: Making Literature in the Age of Multimedia Conglomerates is not about Kristen Roupenian; it's about her agent, Jenni Ferrari-Adler, and the people like her: overlooked professionals in the publishing industry, who shape not only the marketplace

[3] E.B. "What is it about 'Cat Person'?" *The Economist*. 14 December 2017.
[4] Pham, Larissa. "Our Reaction to 'Cat Person' Shows that We are Failing as Readers." *The Village Voice.* 14 December 2017.
[5] Cheng, Amy. "A 'Cat Person' Symposium." *Yale Daily News.*
[6] Bromwich, Jonah Engel. "'Cat Person' Author, Kristen Roupenian, Gets 7-Figure Book Deal." *The New York Times*. 20 December 2017.
[7] Presumably, A24 is trying to release a white feminist version of Jordan Peel's *Get Out.* See Kit, Borys. "A24 Picks Up Horror Script From Author of Viral Short Story 'Cat Person.'" *Hollywood Reporter.* 06 March 2018.

but also the form and content of contemporary fiction. Too often dismissed as "middlemen" or mere bureaucratic functionaries, these professionals—agents, editors, authors (as marketers), distributors—are powerful nodes between artist and corporation, mediating between the domain of literary value and the managerial imperatives of huge media firms. Through its investigation of the processes of production, *Middlemen* pursues two questions: what are the effects of conglomeration on contemporary literature? And how do those effects come into being? It is my contention that the structural changes in the publishing industry also shape *form* and *content* —that the literature produced and promoted within this system should conform to its tastes, bear its imprint, encapsulate its values—such that by understanding this system we might better understand contemporary literature. This dissertation reveals how professionals operate as administrators of literary prestige and "corporate taste" today, shaping the form and content of contemporary fiction while providing access to mainstream publication and cultural consecration. Exploring the influence of middlemen on contemporary literary forms, I blend computational methods, ethnography, literary history, and close reading to model a new method for analyzing the field of literary production. By examining the field at complementary scales, reading distantly and closely, my dissertation argues that contemporary fiction allegorizes the logic of the marketplace, even while critiquing the neoliberal corporatization of literary production.

In its sociological approach, *Middlemen* diverges from influential recent work on US literary institutions that has tended to focus on one or two phases of production: composition (authors, programs, coteries) or circulation (translations, readers, prizes). In these crucial intermediate stages, I argue, the corporation's influence and the logic of the

marketplace are most powerfully administered and enacted. *Middlemen* decenters the events of composition and publication, revealing the ways in which the managerial imperatives of The Big Five insist on corporate collaboration in the compositional process. Moreover, a book's corporate prehistory—its occluded life in pitch letters, profit-and-loss statements, author interviews, and social media campaigns—dramatically shapes the way its circulation and reception. Computational methods, such as network analysis and topic modeling, are vital in bringing these unseen, market-driven decisions to light. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary fiction replicates corporate taste as a result of creative collaboration with publishing's middlemen, even while critiquing the industry's increased commercialization and capitulation to neoliberal managerial practices.

In this introduction, I offer a brief history of conglomeration, sketching the major shift in American publishing during the 20th century and showing some of its effects; this history is far from exhaustive, and each of the following chapters elaborates in greater detail. Next, I outline *Middlemen*'s major interventions in the fields of literary sociology and contemporary American literature. I conclude with detailed chapter descriptions, showing how my consideration of four middlemen—agents, editors, authors, and distributors—contributes to our understanding of the contemporary literary field, and contemporary literary form.

II. Contemporary Publishing, Contemporary Literature

To hear the critics tell it, the publishing industry has been beset by middlemen—unwanted intruders, needlessly gumming up the works—since the 1880s (at the least). In

1898, the literary agent was dismissed as "a parasite" and "a canker,"[8] disrupting the harmonious relationships between publisher and author. In all fairness, a 1910 rejoinder in *Publisher's Weekly* pointed out, "The publisher himself, of course, is both historically and in fact a middleman, an interloper who gradually pushed himself in between the bookseller and the author." Likewise, at some point, booksellers disrupted the relationship between author and printer. Just as this complaint was made many times over the course of the 20th century, and it will continue to be made throughout the 21st. Any number of middlemen continue to crop up in the contemporary—from Amazon.com, to the Book of the Month Club, to publishers' marketing teams. Middlemen of all stripes are uniformly denounced—until they aren't. Gradually these middlemen make themselves indispensible, a necessary function of an ever-expanding industry, and a new professional category develops in response to the demands of the marketplace.

To blame the middlemen—agents, editors, publicists, etc.—for these changes is the *belles lettres* equivalent of shooting the messenger. Indeed, bureaucratic "bloat" can be directly tied to the large-scale changes in the publishing industry over the course of the 20th-century, coming to a crescendo in the 1970s and 80s at the height of mergers and acquisitions. [9] Dovetailing with a number of sociocultural changes in the book business (the paperback revolution, the propagation of major retail chains and discount stores, the growth of subsidiary rights, Hollywood franchises), the mergers and acquisitions of

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[8] Heinemann, qtd. in Hepburn 3, circa 1897.

[9] See Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*; Greco, Rodríguez and Wharton, *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century*; Croteau and Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest*; Jason Epstein, *The Book Business*; André Schriffin, *The Business of Books*; Laura J. Miller, *The Reluctant Capitalists;* Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*; Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter W. Powell, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing.*

midcentury fundamentally shifted both literary production and literary form, the ramifications of which have yet to be fully explored by scholars. Mergers began taking place in the 1960s in the United States, as the powerhouse publishers of the early 20th century began retiring (Random House acquired Knopf in 1960, described by Bennett Cerf as a business deal between friends in his memoir, *At Random*). Through this period, however, publishing maintained a deep and lasting commitment to cultural stewardship, treating their profession as a sort of craft. Media corporations began taking an interest in these growing, merged houses, and began the project of acquiring; soon long-time, independently owned and operated publishers began selling to entertainment corporations to maximize profits. By the 1980s, almost all houses were owned by multi-national corporations—initially the Big Seven, now down to the Big Five: Hachette, Penguin Random House, Harper Collins, Macmillan, Simon & Schuster. Even as independent imprints are now interconnected via their shared ownership by conglomerates, the field has become incredibly crowded, rising from 648 publishing firms in the US alone in 1947 to 3,500 in 2005.[10]

Mergers and acquisitions were not without growing pains for longtime publishers. While publishers maintained a commitment to their work as cultural stewards through the period of mergers at midcentury, their position shifted during acquisitions until, as André Schiffrin, the longtime managing director of publishing at Pantheon Books notes, with the end of the Cold War, the industry shifted from a collective belief in publishing as an act of civic and cultural engagement to a "belief in the market, faith in its ability to conquer

[10] Greco, Rodríguez, and Wharton glean these numbers from the RR Bowker Company (who assign ISBNs) and the US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1947 is the first postwar year with reliable data.

everything, a willingness to surrender all other values to it—and even the belief that it represents a sort of consumer democracy—these things have become the hallmark of publishing" (6). Publishing "has deviated from its true nature by assuming, under duress from unfavorable market conditions and the misconceptions of remote managers, the posture of a conventional business," according to Jason Epstein, editorial director at Random House (4). Schiffrin elaborates:

> Publishers have always prided themselves on their ability to balance the imperative of making money with that of issuing worthwhile books. In recent years, as the ownership of publishing has changed, that equation has been altered. It is now increasingly the case that the owner's *only* interest is in making money and as much of it as possible. (5)

As Schiffrin and Epstein's remarks suggest, several editors and publishers left the industry in disgust during period of conglomeration in the 1980s. A number of editors became agents, finding that their knowledge of publishing houses and editorial imperatives would be exceedingly useful in helping would-be authors find some measure of success. Meanwhile, a number of seasoned editors became executives, ensuring that the book business was not entirely sacrificing literary sensibility on the altar of profits and losses.

Still, many viewed mergers and acquisitions as advantageous due to increased resources, and increased synergy across entertainment industries, the effects on the book business have been decidedly mixed. One of the difficulties has been the collision of distinct media strategies in large conglomerates. As Croteau and Hoynes note, for example, multinational conglomerates implement a large-scale, profit-based media strategy that differs substantially from the strategies of independent houses. "Different segments of the

media industry have historically had significantly different profit margins. Publishing has never been as lucrative as television, for instance. However, with conglomeration… what might have been a respectable profit margin in a particular segment of the industry now may be unacceptable when compared with other divisions of the company" (117-18). Mark Crispin Miller has noted that publishing, while once accustomed to 4% annual profit margins, "have come to expect profits comparable to other parts of their media empires—12-15%" (Crispin Miller, 1997). Editors, then, are entirely averse to risk, insisting on investing only in profitable titles. Editors' predisposition for the risk-proof requires a high-degree of foresight on the agent's part, for they must help an author prepare a title to meet these stringent standards, and pitch accordingly. Authors find that their potential profitability is being measured, beyond the quality of their work or the importance of their contribution, before they can sign with an agent, and before they are offered book contracts. While Coser, Kadushian, and Powell's landmark 1982 study, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*, tentatively raised the question of the relative influence of quality vs. profitability in book publishing, current studies of the publishing industry (Thompson; Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton) offer a resounding answer: profit.

Because the goal is profit, and because these consumer trends cannot be predicted with any accuracy, the type of literary content that is produced is also being guided and controlled by publishers, hoping to find the secret formula to predict what audiences like.[11] Formerly independent publishers have reported a lack of editorial control as increasingly

[11] Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton note that the only person to successfully crack the code on audience expectations and enjoyment is Oprah. Furthermore, they lament the lack of attention to sales figures by industry executives, arguing that this attention to profit margins, in fact, is in no way informed by solid economic or sociological data—making Oprah's success all the more surprising.

corporate, business-minded practices accelerate. Critics of contemporary publishing—yet very few literary scholars—argue that conglomerates have "threatened and undermined the marketplace of ideas, culture, and democracy itself." (11) For McChesney, this restriction manifests in "shaping what manuscripts are considered market-worthy and what authors 'bankable,'…[and] an increased pressure to publish and record writers and artists whose work complements products produced in other branches of these far flung empires" (37). That is to say, media conglomerates look for "synergy" in order to maximize profits in all segments of their media firms, "developing and packaging a single concept for various media." This strategy allows media conglomerates to "take advantage of simultaneous revenue streams, thereby generating as much profit as possible for a single idea… new projects are often created specifically because of their potential to exploit synergy in this way" (Cotreau and Hoynes, 124). It is difficult to imagine a highly brainy novel, such as Tom McCarthy's *C* (which I discuss at length in chapter 3) being picked up for its potential movie tie-in. It is not difficult to imagine *The Art of Fielding* (discussed in chapter 1) on the big or (more likely) small screen; the adaptation is currently in production with IMG and Mandalay Sports Media, managed by William Morris Entertainment (an agency): a prime example of synergy at work.[12] "A book manuscript that might be transformed into a movie, television series, and computer game,"—note the use of *and*, not or—"is likely to be much more attractive to a company than a book that is, well, just a book. The result is that project ideas now live or die based on how well they can be exploited across media—rather than how "good" they are on their own terms" (Cotreau and Hoynes, 124-5). Dovetailing with the potential for synergy, measuring "market

[12] Galuppo, Mia. "'The Art of Fielding' Movie in the Works With IMG, Mandalay." *Hollywood Reporter.* 02 May 2017. Accessed 10 April 2018.

worthiness" has often meant reducing the number of "mid-list" books that are not likely to become bestsellers or have a more limited readership—books that may be more intellectually or aesthetically difficult, experimental, and are incredibly costly to promote.[13]

The result, I argue, is the development of a risk-proof style distinct to the age of multimedia conglomerates, known as *upmarket literary fiction*; neither "literary fiction" nor "genre fiction," upmarket has developed fairly recently as a category, employed primarily by agents and editors to describe the potential for a manuscript. Carly Watters, VP and Senior Agent at P.S. Literary Agency, describes "literary fiction" as distinguished by the craft and quality of language, as opposed to "commercial fiction," which tends to include genre fiction, books that are fast-paced, and books that are easy to read. Upmarket fiction blends the commercial and the literary, attracting readers who follow a particular genre as well as those who are attentive to elegant prose; it is a term that refers to the audience (and, by extension, profitability) of a book first and foremost.

III. Literary Institutions, Literary Production

Conglomeration and its effects have received little attention from scholars. This absence is rather shocking, as mergers and acquisitions mark the most substantial rearrangement of the literary field in the 20th century. As the term attests, "conglomeration" is, of course, an exceedingly large and complex topic, to be approached in any number of ways; moreover, it seems somewhat futile to pursue the question of conglomeration when the process remains ongoing. We will likely only begin to understand the effect of this industrial reorganization after some time. *Middlemen* approaches the issue of

[13] See Croteau and Hoynes, 123; See Thompson, 16-17.

conglomeration's effects through the professionals who act as administrators of corporate tastes—the unstudied go-betweens who are responsible for enacting and enforcing contemporary industry standards, thereby producing that unwieldy body of work that we've come to call "contemporary literature." In investigating the effect of conglomeration on contemporary literature, *Middlemen* is firmly situated in relationship to recent studies on literary sociology and literary institutions. In its study of the contemporary publishing industry, *Middlemen* makes two key interventions: first, I detail the overlooked processes of production, arguing that these mediating practices are central to any understanding of the field; second, through my attention to these mechanisms, I connect large-scale studies of the literary field to small-scale developments in literary form, showing the relationships between institutional and aesthetic practices.

In the wake of the publication of Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009), a number of scholars have turned toward once-outmoded sociological approaches to literary study, considering the relationship between institution and literary production. McGurl's study of the MFA program and the development of post-war fiction founded a veritable cottage industry of MFA-related sociological studies, whether considering the relationship between the Iowa Writer's Workshop and the CIA, the creative writing program and poetry, or popular arguments about "MFA vs. NYC."[14] As an institution, the university loves to self-memorialize, which perhaps accounts for the availability of source material motivating this trend. The publishing industry was once committed to keeping thorough archival materials (publishers often wrote memoirs), facilitating a number of thoughtful studies of publishing

[14] See Bennett, Eric. *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War*; Glass, Loren (ed). *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of the Creative Writing Program in America*; Harbach, Chad (ed.) *MFA vs. NYC.*

prior to mergers and acquisitions, such as Evan Brier's *A Novel Marketplace* (2010), Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), or Loren Glass's *Counterculture Colophon* (2013); yet, this process seems to have ended with mergers and acquisitions, as the cultural mission of publishing houses changed (with the exception of still-independent houses or notable intellectual presses, such as New Directions). Given the dearth of source material, few scholars have taken sociological approaches to the contemporary publishing industry; the few studies that have ventured into the contemporary have focused on one small segment, as in Amy Hungerford's deep-dive into the McSweeney's coterie.

While these studies have been particularly significant in reconfiguring our understanding of the literary field, I argue that they have been unduly attentive to one of two phases of literary production: either composition or reception. Leading scholars of literary sociology and institutions have made compelling cases for the study of literary institutions of production (as in Mark McGurl's influential study on the postwar creative writing program) and publication (as in Loren Glass's history of Grove Press, or Amy Hungerford's deep dive into McSweeney's). Meanwhile, scholars have been increasingly attentive to circulation and reception, understanding economies of prestige (James English), translation and circulation (Pascale Casanova, Rebecca Walkowitz), and of individual reading communities (Janice Radway). *Middlemen* drags the cursor back, and proposes a model of reading that is commensurate with processes of book production, decentering the event of publication to emphasize the ways in which a book's prehistory occasions, and oftentimes predetermines, that book's publication, circulation, and reception. The central premise of this dissertation is that studying the processes of literary production—what I'm calling the "backend" of production—is crucial to understanding the

contemporary literary field. In web development, the "backend" of a website includes a server, database, and programming on and with which the site is built; the "frontend," by contrast, is the public-facing interface that is accessible to novice users. I find the application of this concept to literary production instructive, for it reveals that even the most compelling sociological accounts of literary production address the frontend almost exclusively. By contrast, the choices made by and for industry insiders—choices reflected in pitch letters, the book auction, and, say, gushing emails from potential agents—dramatically shape the way the book is received by others in the industry and by the public, and demand our attention for a fuller account of contemporary literary production. By giving pride of place to the event of publication—the release of a book to the public for sale—we overlook the ways in which literature comes into being.

Likewise, dismissing these mechanisms of literary production has had an unintended but significant effect on studies of the contemporary. When we cut out the middleman, I argue, we lose the connection between literary field and literary form, between large and small scales. If the goal is to understand the *effects* of conglomeration, then we must turn our attention to the site of that influence: the space in which the priorities of the conglomerate are administered and enforced, the relationships in which culture and commerce meet. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* (2010) is the most exhaustive sociological study of the publishing industry after mergers and acquisitions, providing both a helpful case study and a rigorous foundation for this project. Yet, Thompson pays little to no attention to the literature that is produced within the system that he so rigorously examines. (Thompson is not a literary scholar.) That is to say, while Thompson is keenly aware of the shifting role of the literary agent, say, he does not

consider the relationship between an agent and an author she represents to be a creative collaboration, and his analysis, therefore, always stops short of conjectures on contemporary literature. Yet, *Middlemen* maintains that the process of conglomeration has shaped the nature of contemporary literature; any aesthetic or formal consideration of contemporary literature—whether post-post –modern, post-ironic, post-critical, or any number of formulations – must address the vast shifts in literary field, marketplace, and publishing industry.

While English's *The Economy of Prestige* is invested the "strictly functional" middling stages of cultural production, considering those figures and processes who are "practically invisible within the prevailing optics of cultural study" (14), his scope of analysis remains at the level of the field, without adequately connecting the large-scale mechanisms of his economy of prestige to changes in literary production at the level of literary form. This work has been taken up, of late, by quantitative approaches to literature and culture, often referred to as cultural analytics. Andrew Piper and Richard Jean So have been attentive to the relationship between literary prizes and literary aesthetics, while Ted Underwood has considered the historic relationship between book reviews, prestige, and language. Data-driven approaches such as these help to facilitate a conversation between large-scale and small-scale, between field and form, that is ultimately necessary to understand the effect of conglomeration. To that end, *Middlemen* incorporates large-scale data analytics in order to demonstrate the ultimate effects on the field.

I contend that any approach to the contemporary must account for the data that structures literary production—the data *around* texts. Increasingly, the contemporary publishing industry is powered by data collection—whether formal, as in the case of comp

titles (discussed in chapter two) or readers' ratings of a book (chapter four), or informal, as in the reputation of an agent (chapter one) or a writer's platform (chapter three). Drawing on methods that have proven successful in sister media, the Big Five have created (and, indeed, are still creating) sprawling data systems to codify and analyze all levels of production and circulation, from the development of a data-driven acquisition process to recent forays by Penguin Random House into "reader analytics" (following Amazon and Netflix).[15] By contrast, scholars of contemporary literature have not been quick to embrace computational methods of analysis. While large-scale repositories such as the Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Early English Books Online, the Chadwyck Healey Corpus, and the wealth of material digitized by HathiTrust have allowed computational approaches to flourish in periods prior to 1923, scholars of the 20th and 21st centuries confront a range of technical and material barriers to distant reading—most significantly, copyright.[16] While we may not have texts *as* data, we do have access to textual data of a different sort: quarterly catalogs, sales figures, and reader analytics.

IV. A Note on Methods

I began this study with two simple commitments: first, that it is important for scholars of contemporary literature to understand the people who make books—their tastes, their commitments, their responsibilities—and how they understand their work in relation to a larger literary field; and second, that the best way to learn about these

[15] A company called JellyBooks has begun experimenting with "reader analytics." JellyBooks provides readers with free eBooks in exchange for their personal data (bookmarks, underlines, reading pace, etc.); the company's team of data scientists analyzes this data and provides information to publishers. They cite Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster as two of their current clients.

[16] The most notable exception is currently underway at the McGill University .txtLAB.

professionals is to speak to them directly. In his introduction to a 2010 special issue on Literary Sociology in *New Literary History*, James English remarked upon "a tendency to draw on the most innovative sociological work by literary critics for its conclusions rather than its methods" (xiii-xiv). In this dissertation, I make a point of drawing on sociological methods as much as sociological conclusions. In addition to my reliance on more traditional modes of literary scholarship (close reading) and the increasingly-common data analysis, I also rely on another method of sociological research: ethnography.

Over the course of two years, I interviewed over twenty participants who are currently active in the publishing industry—executives, agents, editors, and publicists. These interviews provided me the opportunity to learn about the publishing industry firsthand. Much of this dissertation, then, relies on thick description; because these professionals have been overlooked and dismissed for far too long, I believe that there is both an ethical and an intellectual imperative to learn as much about their positions in the literary field *in their own words*. Not only does ethnography redress a lack of appropriate attention, but it also offers a corrective to unquestioned biases and assumptions; that is to say, scholars have not studied literary agents because they have presumed to understand what agents do. My ethnographic interviews thus respond to a lack of scholarly attention and an inaccurate understanding. Throughout this dissertation, then, I quote participants at length, utilizing these interviews as my most valuable primary source. Even still, my methodological commitment to allow my participants to speak for themselves without prematurely imposing an analytical framework was complicated by my professional proximity to my subjects—a phenomenon that Janice Radway describes in her essay, "Ethnography Amongst Elites." Though my participants and I share many intellectual

interests (and demographic similarities), the boundary between literary scholarship and literary commerce was always clear, and a centerpiece of conversation. These interviews are thus, in many ways, a performance of literariness and criticality on all of our parts, both reinforcing and transgressing the boundary between (and the stereotypes about) our respective positions. I strive to illuminate this tension whenever possible.

In keeping with the parameters for human subject research established by the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University, each participant consented to be interviewed with the guarantee of full anonymity. In what follows, I reveal only general demographic information and eliminate any and all identifying information (including anything that might associate participants with their clients or their employer). For the most part, my participants' comments remain unedited, aside from editorial adjustments to conform speech patterns to standard academic prose (i.e., removing verbal tics such as "like", "um", and "right?"). In instances in which participants have been edited, standard editorial marks are in place. Every effort was made to ensure that participants' comments are consistent with their original context. Though participants remain anonymous, I relied on member checking (sending participants a full transcript of their interview), allowing them the opportunity to edit comments for either content or context; none of my participants chose to edit transcripts. Likewise, I employed on a snowball sampling method, identifying one or two potential participants (often based on a *New York Times* profile) and soliciting the names of their friends and colleagues who might likewise be willing to sit for an interview; in these instances, a participant's identity was revealed, with their consent.

In many ways, this is an untraditional dissertation to emerge from within an English department; very few literary scholars have ventured out of the library and into the living

room to conduct interviews and build relationships with their participants. I am particularly indebted to the work of Janice Radway, whose *Reading the Romance* and *A Feeling for Books* provide masterful examples of both literary ethnography and a nascent form of distant reading.[17] (I return to Radway's contributions to literary and cultural studies in chapter four.) Even still, and perhaps in response to Radway's example, English's chiding, or McGurl's influence, scholars are beginning to experiment with sociological methods. Amy Hungerford's major contribution in *Making Literature Now* was her commitment to *talking with* the members of Dave Eggers' McSweeney's collective as she discussed the still-evolving impact of the coterie on contemporary literature and the emerging New Sincerity or Post-Irony. Likewise, in infusing ethnography with a sense of historicity, Loren Glass's extensive interviews with Barney Rossett of Grove Press have also provided a crucial first-hand history of 20th century literary institutions. Ethnography, then, helps to address the problem of an institution in flux: not only do firsthand accounts help us understand how culture is administered, but they also serve as an important historical record, memorializing an industry that is unfolding in real-time.

V. Chapter Outline

Middlemen: Making Literature in the Age of Multimedia Conglomerates is arranged in such a way as to follow the path a book might travel, focusing on the hands it passes through, on its journey to publication. It is divided into two main sections: first, production and second, reception. I consider, first, literary agents and editors under the banner of literary production, and turn to authors and distributors in order to engage questions of

[17] Ted Underwood traces distant reading to Radway in "A Genealogy of Distant Reading."

literary reception. Each chapter blends methodologies, alternately weaving together ethnography, data analysis, and paratextual analysis with close reading. *Middlemen* brings together a variety of contemporary novels; the selection of each of these novels was guided by the participants with which I spoke, or the system under consideration. Each was published after 2010, a product of what I have been calling late-stage conglomeration (the Big Six was reduced to the Big Five in 2013, with the merger of Penguin and Random House). Each is an example of upmarket literary fiction, that signal genre of multimedia conglomerates. Finally, each typifies a sector of the market, their publication history highlighting key corporate mandates. Taken together, these novels represent a sort of "industry fiction," each intersecting or exemplifying the industry that produced it.

I begin not with the author, but with the agent—a manuscript's first point of contact, by extension, with the publishing world. Chapter One, "Agents," explores influence of the most influential (if most overlooked) figure in the publishing industry. I begin by historicizing the rise of literary agents, tracing their development from optional interloper to a principal tastemaker in the contemporary through; through a reading of publishers' memoirs (often lamenting the agent's intrusion) and archival editions of trade publications such as *Publisher's Weekly* and *Writer's Market,* I map the development of literary agency as a professional class onto international shifts in the publishing world, principally the mergers and acquisitions that upended the industry in the 1970s and 80s. Next, I take up the poorly understood role of the literary agent in the contemporary marketplace, relying on interviews that I conducted with influential literary agents. My interviews reveal that agents rely on maximal risk in order to distinguish themselves as tastemakers in a precarious marketplace; they exert their influence over a text from its earliest stages,

actively developing a manuscript with an eye toward the preferences of the publishers they will pitch, in order to mitigate such risk and maximize their prestige, leading to the development of a new bottom-line driven genre, "upmarket literary fiction." I read Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* (2011), a book that earned its young agent a great deal of notoriety, as a chief example of this new category of fiction. *Fielding*, I argue, allegorically reflects on the shifting nature of creativity and collaboration in another competitive industry—not the literary field, but the baseball diamond. I conclude by conducting a social network analysis of agents who have represented prizewinning authors from 2000 to the present. Computational analysis reveals that literary trends—"world literature," for instance, or even "formally innovative explorations of race and ethnicity in the US"—centralize rather stunningly around individual agents such as Andrew Wylie or Nicole Aragi. First-readers and fierce champions, literary agents and their tastes are crucial to understanding the logic of the contemporary literary field.

Picking up after the agent's pitch, I turn next to "Editors," in Chapter Two, examining the decision-making processes and calculations made once a book enters the corporate imprint. This chapter hinges on a simple question: "How do you decide to buy a manuscript?" I asked this question of junior-level editors in the Big Five, the front-line bidders of new acquisitions (particularly working with new novelists); their answers illuminate the ways that multimedia conglomerates assign literary value: "comps," or "comparative titles," as outlined by internally circulated Profit-and-Loss Statements. Dependent on both style and profit, comps are carefully selected by acquisitions editors, both to predict a book's performance on the market and to appeal to the tastes of a senior editor. More than bestseller lists or academic consecration via syllabi, comps represent the

most significant metric of literary value and influence in contemporary publishing, a key arbiter of corporate taste. But comps also play another role in contemporary literary production: standardization. Based on large-scale data analysis of all comp titles identified by the Big Five in 2016, I show how comps have a homogenizing effect on contemporary literature, delimiting the field narrowly by virtue of editors' aversion to risk and general fiscal conservatism. As a homogenizing system, however, comps also provide a mechanism by which prestigious imprints might present the appearance of bucking the system, offering a mechanism for distinction for more self-consciously literary imprints. Trends in comp title data demonstrate that even as this system better defines the category of "upmarket literary fiction" through an emphasis on the historical present, comps restrict not only what is published, but also *who* is able to publish; the system of comp titles is partly responsible for the lack of racial diversity in the contemporary publishing world. *The Flamethrowers* (2016) by Rachel Kushner is a prime example of the homogenizing effect that comps can have on the literary field. I read Kushner's novel not only as a product of this system (*The Flamethrowers* was the most influential comp in 2016), but also as an allegory of that system. In *The Flamethrowers*, the art world of the 1970s stands in for the publishing industry. A New York City transplant named Reno begins evaluating, and is evaluated by, a system of comps that reveal competing systems of aesthetic and political value. I conclude with a network analysis, relying on data from publishers' quarterly catalogs that lists the comp titles determined by acquisitions editors. I uncover both the most frequently invoked comp titles and the works to which they are compared, mapping contemporary literary prestige at the nexus of commerce and culture.

The third chapter marks a shift in this project, from production to reception. In the remaining chapters, I consider not the role of middlemen in shaping the production of a title—that is, how corporate aesthetics infiltrate through editorial processes—but the role of industry professionals in shaping the paraliterary apparatus that comprise a book's marketing, distribution, and, by extension, reception. In Chapter Three, I belatedly turn to "Authors." This chapter's position within the overall project is instructive: I am less interested in authors as writers or creators than in authors as *publicists*. Authors who publish with the Big Five, or even with a mid-sized corporate house, must now become brands and develop strategic platforms for self-promotion. Through a reading of trade publications such as *Writer's Market*, I trace the history of authorial platforming and book promotion to the advent of social media, showing the decided shift toward author platform-driven marketing in the contemporary. More than just the occasional NPR interview, authors are now held responsible for social media presence, audience engagement, book tours, and well-timed advertorial essays—often well before they can sign a book deal in the first place. The PR strategy of the platform, I argue, is a crucial paraliterary context for both a novel's promotion and shaping the reception of the novel in advance; while platforms provide an often discomforting level of exposure for an author (remember Cormac McCarthy's unfortunate Oprah interview), they also provide authors an opportunity and the influence with which they can directly engage the publishing industry. A prime example of a writer who uses his impressive platform to critical ends is British novelist Tom McCarthy, a somewhat unlikely success story. Through a reading of Tom McCarthy's author platform, I show how the habitus of authorship is shifting under the Big Five and corporate publishing broadly. McCarthy's novels and essays build a holistic brand

for the novelist, associating him with the historic avant-garde and the brainier pursuits of critical theory (a far cry from the "upmarket" we saw in chapters 1 and 2); yet McCarthy uses his brand strategically to expose and thereby outsmart the logic of contemporary publishing. In conjunction with his platform, I read McCarthy's novels *C* (2011) and *Satin Island* (2015) as an extension of his brand and platform respectively, showing how McCarthy proposes an alternative form of authorship in the contemporary, made possible by his new status as middleman.

The economic arrangements that structure the marketplace are still in flux. Chapter Four, "Distributors," examines one of these new economic systems, the Subscription Economy, and the modes of literary production it generates. I consider the role of the recently relaunched Book of the Month Club; once the object of study for Janice Radway, Book of the Month 2.0 has relaunched as a subscription service, positioning itself between publisher and reader, ready to help well-educated women (aged 20-35) and members of the Creative Class sort through the dross of online shopping by providing a monthly selection perfectly-curated to the her taste. Proposing a new model of book distribution in the 21st Century, Book of the Month generates subscriber participation on Instagram and Facebook, monetizing reading as a luxurious, community-oriented experience; the company encourages consumer-generated advertising while collecting massive amounts of subscriber data, fusing reading, advertisement, and surveillance. Crystallizing this ethos is Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), the first book sent to subscribers after the BOTM relaunch. Even as the fictional texts of the novel connect an expansive network of characters, the Traveling Symphony collects data on the citizens of the post-apocalyptic world under the guise of promoting literacy. As a distributional middleman, Book of the

Month fills a very specific niche in the industry: namely, the pursuit of quantification and automation, transforming the otherwise unpredictable process of book sales through massive data collection—supposedly, to the benefit of subscribers. Yet, in so doing, Book of the Month is also complicit in ethically-dubious, large-scale data brokerage.

Contemporary literature—whether made in boardrooms or on balance sheets, via buzz or by boxes—has been shaped dramatically by its processes of production. Like the figures that I study, my project seeks to find commonalities, make connections, and to negotiate a harmonious—if not always easy-going—meeting between otherwise disparate parties and fields. Ultimately, *Middlemen* argues that scholars of contemporary literature must remain attentive to the economic workings of the literary field broadly, and to the increasing aesthetic influence that is enjoyed by the corporations that produce contemporary literature, through a consideration of the industry's most influential gatekeepers.

CHAPTER ONE:

Agents

I. The Pitch

Our scene opens on a baseball diamond in Peoria, IL, the sound of catcher Mike Schwartz's joints protesting as he squats behind home plate. He quickly sizes up the opposing team's batter—concave chest and spaghetti arms—and hurls an insult. But after the game, Schwartz witnesses something else entirely.

> Only after the game ended, when the kid returned to the sun-scorched diamond to take extra grounders, did Schwartz see the grace that shaped Henry's every move. … [Schwartz] looked around to see who else had been watching—wanted at least the pleasure of exchanging a glance with another enraptured witness—but nobody was paying any attention… All his life Schwartz had yearned to possess some single transcendent talent, some unique brilliance that the world would consent to call genius. Now that he'd seen that kind of talent up close, he couldn't let it walk away. (4-6)

So begins Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* (2011): with a chance discovery. Shortstop Henry Skrimshander is an artist, and Mike Schwartz ("Schwartzy") has had the good fortune to find him. Imagine how this scene might strike a young literary agent, in search of such a genius; surely, he would recognize something of his own work in Schwartz's first awestruck encounter with Henry's virtuosic skill. The novel seems designed to capture the attention of its first reader immediately, acutely tuned to the workaday demands of literary agency and the thrill of the find.

The gambit worked. To say that Chris Parris-Lamb, the man who would become Harbach's agent, identified strongly with Schwartzy's thrilling discovery would be an understatement. Immediately after his first read-through of *Fielding*, Parris-Lamb wrote Harbach an email:

> I loved this book in a way that reminded me of why I got into this business. Watching this novel unfold, I felt like Mike Schwartz at that field in Peoria when he first discovered Henry, and I saw something of myself in 22-year-old Schwartzy at the end of the novel, too: those who can't (or can no longer) do, coach; those who love books, but whose appreciation for what it takes to write great ones makes them all the more aware that they'll never have what it takes—well, we go into publishing…. If you'll give me the chance, I'm going to work like hell to see that it gets the publication, and reception, and readership it deserves… In the final reckoning, agents are ultimately only as good as the books they represent, and you're giving someone a shot here to be the best. (qtd. in Gessen).

It is no wonder, then, that *The Art of Fielding* would go on to become one of the most financially successful and critically acclaimed books of 2011. Parris-Lamb made good on his promise to work like hell for *Fielding*, conducting a fierce and much publicized book auction for the novel (then touted as "the biggest fiction auction in recent history"), fetching an unheard-of advance for a first-time author ($665,000), landing the front page of the annual Little, Brown sales catalog, securing a legendary editor (Michael Pietsch) to oversee the book's production, and holding steady for nine weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. But before Parris-Lamb committed to *The Art of Fielding,* three other notable

agents passed on the book. It is too tempting not to indulge in speculation, not to wonder where *The Art of Fielding* might be without this chance encounter, without the good eye and competitive drive of an enterprising young agent.

There is no figure more influential in contemporary literature than the agent, and no figure less studied by scholars. Too often dismissed as a mere middleman or bureaucratic functionary, the agent is, in fact, a powerful gatekeeper who has determined the course of literary production in the 21st century: she carefully selects manuscripts from an ever-growing pile of submissions, preparing both author and manuscript for editors, publishers, and the reading public. She becomes her author's closest confidante, friend, and advocate. Her reputation is built on her taste, which is highly regarded by editors and publishers. It is not unusual to find an agent profiled in *The New York Times* Culture pages for her championing of important new and important work—and for the size of the advances that she is able to secure. Agents trade in symbolic and financial capital; they are arbiters of cultural taste and administrators of the logic of corporate publishing.

Of course, this was not always the case. For much of the 20th century, agents were seen as outsiders, intruders—or, as Jason Epstein put it, "mere peripheral necessities, like dentists, consulted as needed" (6). Now, it is impossible to be published at a major house without representation. Despite this change, the agent's outsized influence has remained largely ignored by scholars. While agents' rise to prominence has begun to be historicized in the context of the mergers and acquisitions that shook the publishing industry in the 1970s and 80s, agents represent an unstudied, but important, locus of power in the

contemporary literary field.[18] What might a consideration of the literary agent reveal to us about the mechanisms and industries of contemporary literary production? How do agents influence contemporary literary production? Put another way, can we read contemporary literature as being "agented"?

To begin to survey this terrain, I historicize the agent's rise to power in the 20th Century, relying on archival editions of *Writer's Market*, the leading trade publication for authors, to demonstrate the changing perceptions of the profession and the marketplace. As this chapter turns to consider the agent in the contemporary, I employ ethnographic techniques, analyzing a series of interviews I conducted with leading agents over the course of six months. Because agents manage both the artistic *and* the corporate development of the book, I argue that the agents' influence extends to the form and content of the fiction they most strenuously represent. I analyze this phenomenon through a case study of *The Art of Fielding*, a book whose production and circulation was occasioned by a high-profile auction and sale; more than simply a book that generated a lot of buzz, *Fielding* reproduces the conditions of its production and the logic of the marketplace, allegorizing the ways in which the collective belief in "taste" and artistry stand in as a bulwark against precarity in another high-risk field—not the literary field, but the baseball diamond.[19] I conclude this chapter by proposing a model of networked reading that centers on the agent as key cultural producers and literary gatekeepers. I argue that, taken together, these

[18] The most important and comprehensive study of literary agents in the contemporary is chapter 2 ("The Rise of Literary Agents") of John B. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture*. Thompson extensively interviews Morton Janklow and Andrew Wylie, two men whose work fundamentally changed the profession in the 1980s, revealing the agent's centrality in the contemporary marketplace. Thompson does not consider literary texts.

[19] For this argumentative turn, I am indebted to the work of J.D. Connor, whose *The Studio after the Studios* offers a compelling case for the productive nature of allegory as a mode of critical inquiry.

agents and their books reveal the shifting nature of literary taste and creativity in the age of multinational media conglomerates.

By directing our attention to the agent, the intermediary between artist and corporation, we can see how the logic of the marketplace is reproduced—and critiqued—in the logic of the text. This is vital not only to more fully understand the literary reception, but also to understanding the workings of corporate publishing: in the decision to pre-empt, bid, or pass at auction; in the selection of a cover; in the internal and external communications about a book, the aesthetic values of the Big Five are on full display. [20]

II. The Rise of the Literary Agent

The first literary agent set up shop in the United States at the end of the 19th Century. The excitement and anger whipped up over the agent's new role as "middleman" was one of the most significant—and heated—debates in literary circles at the turn-of-the-century, a debate around which the roles and functions of publisher, bookseller, and agent all solidified.[21] As agents emerged within the field of literary production, other players in the field repositioned themselves uneasily, loath to cede ground to this professional upstart.[22]

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[20] Simon & Schuster (a subsidiary of CBS Corporation), HarperCollins (a subsidiary of News Corp), Penguin Random House (a subsidiary of Bertelsmann Pearson), Macmillan (owned by Holtzbrinck), and Hachette Livre comprise the "Big Five," the largest English-language publishing conglomerates.

[21] This chapter is restricted to the development of the profession in the United States. For an excellent account of the agent's early professional life, see Mary Ann Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920.*

[22] It is impossible to quantitatively account for either the increase in the number of literary agents in the United States, or the shift in the invisible but powerful forces of prestige. Literary agency is a completely unregulated business. As such, there is no reliable data about the numbers of literary agents currently operating in the US or the UK. Data provided by professional organizations are partial, yet show a serious spike in agency around the 1980s. A suitable proxy might be major sociological studies of the book industry. In their

Yet, even early publishers had to admit that an agent's services were useful. Early agents were employed either by booksellers or by publishers, working to recruit exciting new authors and negotiating book trade across the Atlantic.[23] Agents in the U.K. modeled themselves after A.P. Watt, widely accepted as the first professional literary agent, who conducted himself more as an advertiser than as a negotiator, working for the good of both the publisher and the author.[24] The trend of working equally for both authors and publishers continued in the United States; Paul Revere Reynolds, the first agent in the U.S., initially provided services as a broker of transatlantic book deals, with equal allegiance to both parties.[25] Watt, Reynolds, and their immediate descendants contracted with publishers on behalf of authors, scouted for authors on behalf of publishers, facilitated transatlantic deals, collected royalties, and negotiated the terms of suitable contracts.

Yet many within the industry viewed agents as threats to the social network that underpinned business practices. Publishers felt that agents were unnecessarily inserting themselves into the time-honored relationships between authors and editors, and creating animosity through the mere suggestion of competing—as opposed to mutual—interests. Often cited is the vitriolic anti-agent statement from William Heinemann, made in 1897:

1982 study *Books: The Commerce and Culture of Publishing*, Coser, Kadushin, and Powell dedicate just a small section of 1 chapter (of 13 total) to agents: the chapter is entitled "Middlemen in Publishing," leading off Part III of their study, entitled "Key Outsiders in the Book Trade." By contrast John B. Thompson's 2010 study, *Merchants of Culture,* gives agents a place of prominence: "Chapter Two, The Rise of Literary Agents." Bookending the age of publishing mergers and acquisitions, the relative emphasis of these texts speaks to the agent's rise in both numbers and symbolic capital.

[23] See John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, pp 60.

[24] See Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain*; Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse;* Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*

[25] See Coser, Kadushin, and Powell, *Books;* Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*

> He is generally a parasite. He always flourishes. I have been forced to give him some attention lately in my particular business. In it, he calls himself the literary agent… I cannot help hoping [The Society of Authors] will… lend its powerful aid to kill the canker that is eating itself into the very heart of our mutual interests. (qtd. in Hepburn 3).

The aggressive salvos from Heinemann and his ilk overlook the ways in which author representation had occurred in an informal fashion for decades—for "as long as authors have had friends" (Hepburn 22).[26] Well before the literary agent came to prominence as a formal, organized profession, agency was a casual and common occurrence, in function if not in name; well-connected authors and booksellers would often behave as brokers for their writer friends, making introductions to publishers and throwing their social capital behind work they believed to be important. One well-known example of literary networking and informal author-representation was Ezra Pound's championing of T.S. Eliot's work, thoroughly catalogued by Lawrence Rainey; though Pound was not Eliot's (or anyone's) agent, he performed functions that are now typically reserved for agents alone. The Bel Esprit patronage project, for instance, which ensured that Eliot could live on his wages as a writer, was proposed and publicized by Pound. Solicitously, Pound took bids for *The Waste Land* from *Vanity Fair* and *The Little Review*, driving up the price of the poem,

[26] As Mary Ann Gillies points out, many other "middlemen" of literary publishing were operating on both sides of the Atlantic long before the literary agents that Heinemann attacks. Societies of Authors, such as the one to whom Heinemann addressed his attack, operated as a sort of proto-Union. Newspaper syndication agents, for instance, travelled the United States to sell stories from one paper to another. Similarly, authors employed travel coordination bureaus to plan lucrative book and speaking tours on their behalf. Publishers readers'—assistants, in common day parlance—also acted as de facto agents. See Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1980-1920*.

sight unseen, by pitting rival publications against one another in a sort of proto-book auction.[27]

Even still, Heinemann believed that the existence of literary agents as a professional category had the potential to upset the order of things for the publisher, the author, and for literature itself. He opined in *Author* in 1901 that agents are detrimental to the publisher because "the literary agent prevents that free and intimate intercourse between author and publisher which is from my experience of unquestioned mutual advantage," and detrimental to the author because he believed it to be "an advantage to authors to be in personal communication with their publishers" (qtd. in Hepburn 80). Though agents were pretty well ensconced as a professional category by 1914, Heinemann-style critiques would continue through midcentury.[28] Jason Epstein, who began as a junior editor at Doubleday and would go on to become the Editorial Director at Random House, recalls his relationship with authors in highly familial tones, emphasizing the relationships maintained between authors and their publishing houses: "authors became our lifelong friends…most of our friendships were with our authors and we jealously reserved these valuable intimacies for ourselves" (Epstein 5).[29] This ethos of mutuality—of working together, with like-minded individuals, on a craft—is what the agent supposedly disrupted with his focus on contract negotiations and financial gains.

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[27] See Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*.
[28] Both Mary Ann Gillies and James Hepburn cite the early teens for the emergence of what Hepburn will call (in 1968) "true agents."
[29] It is worth noting that Epstein penned his memoirs in the 1990s, about his career in the 1950s. His view on agents in the 1950s did not reflect the historical reality of the agent's influence; that he reiterated this perspective in the 1990s suggests the staying power of the narrative of the agent's unnecessary intervention in an otherwise friendly relationship.

Of course, this rosy image of the industry directly benefitted publishers—often to the detriment of authors. The more that authors were discouraged from seeking capable and fair representation, the more that a publisher could exploit an author's lack of knowledge while bolstering the image of publisher as caring patron. In fact, authors were often treated badly by publishers who were able to exercise authority wholesale.[30] Much of the anti-agent rhetoric expressed by Heinemann and others, as Coser, Kadushin, and Powell note, echoes anti-union propaganda at the turn of the century, "with unions being cast as villains disturbing the paternalistic intimacy of factory owners and workers" (286). The sense of mutual interest, commitment to literature, and an intimate working relationship—though perhaps genuine on the part of famed editors such as Max Perkins—had the effect of masking the ways in which the publishing industry was ultimately profit-driven, despite salutatory claims to the contrary.

There are thus two interconnected strands in the history of the literary agent in the United States: first, the story of a changing industry, and second, the story of a changing perception. Neither has been particularly well documented, but publishers have been quicker than agents to pen memoirs. To address both the question of industry and the issue of perception, I turn to *Writer's Market*, the leading trade publication for authors, a helpful resource for understanding the ins-and-outs of the publishing industry since 1938. Including a dense index of who's who in the publishing world, *Writer's Market* offers invaluable insight into the structural changes in the industry throughout the 20th Century,

[30] John Tebbel has argued that, prior to the commonplace representation by agents, authors were "treated badly, on the whole, by publishers, who felt free to edit their work without permission, to insist often that they pay all or part of publishing costs, and to share as little as possible as the royalties" (737). Similarly, John Hepburn argued that publishers "did not acknowledge that an unpleasantness between themselves and authors was partly responsible for the appearance of the literary agent" (3).

trading in the professional stereotypes and biases that often accompany such shop talk, as the case of the literary agent shows.

Early editions of *Writer's Market* align the writer and publisher, suggesting that these business relationships are, in fact, structured according to a general good will. Similarly, they promote the industry-wide distrust for agents, dissuading authors from contracting with agents, subtly elevating the paternalistic relationships between authors and editors. The 1941 edition purports to give authors all of the information that agents might, from advice on generic formulae (i.e., "The Slick Paper Fiction Formula," and "The Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot"), to tips on the best ways to make an impression when mailing your manuscript (including proper paper stock, margins, and postal options), to what to look for when signing a contract. Writers are advised, "Before mailing a novel to a publisher you should have a good idea of *why* you are sending it to that special publisher. Study the catalogues of book publishers or consult a good friend or critic" (128). In freely dispensing the expertise that an agent would offer, *Writer's Market* both portrays the industry as open, knowable, and accessible, even while rendering the agent's specialized knowledge obsolete. As late as 1947, the publication weighs in decisively on agents' relative use to authors. "Market your own work until you have made a few sales," editor Aron M. Mathieu advises:

> When do you want an agent? The agent practically answers that himself by saying: 'Until you have sold $1,000 worth of literary material to good markets within a period of one year, I will charge you a reading fee.' Until the author is a steady producer, the agent can't make enough money at a 10% commission to justify his time. (8-9).

Using the agent's commonplace fee structure against him, Mathieu portrays agents as concerned only with their commission. This description stands in sharp contrast to Epstein's mythos of the publishing house: where the agent sees only a potential commission, the editor sees an artist to be nurtured.

Through the 1950s, an agent's job was described in the pages of *WM* in terms of sales and marketing alone; said another way, the craft of literature is never associated with the agent. Without a large enough commission, *Writer's Market* argued in 1955, agents could *hardly* be trusted to perform even their services as a salesperson adequately. "Many authors feel that… they are imposing on an agent when they ask him to market a first novel…[since] such an imposition is likely to result in something less than a perfect job of selling, the author may want to market his first novel himself" (196). Not only was the profession presented as subpar, but doubt was cast on the agent's ability to perform even these "minor" tasks. Well into the 1960s, *Writer's Market* asserts the value of the author's relationship with the publisher, and continues to position the agent as an optional service provider, their contribution to the author and to the creative process significantly downplayed. At best, agents functioned like personal assistants: "The easiest way to dispense with all thought and trouble of marketing is to ship the novel off to an agent" (196). This mildly positive endorsement was included in 1961, the year that "Author's Agents" received a designated index in *Writer's Market*—in the back of the book.

Yet, the conflicting (sometimes downright contradictory) advice in *Writer's Market* reflected the instability of the changing publishing industry. Though *WM* openly discouraged the use of an agent into the 1960s, the index reflects a heightened awareness of issues of copyright, and subsidiary rights beginning at a much earlier date, gesturing

toward a market in flux. In 1941, the guide naïvely advises writers, "Be sure to retain movie, radio, serial and all other rights when selling your novel. Do this by putting on the first page of your script, opposite your name and address, the words 'First American Book Right Only,'" (128). While authors are encouraged to retain the rights to their novel in this manner *without* legal representation, they are encouraged to employ an agent if Hollywood is their goal. This advice goes for film, theater, and radio, too. Again, from 1941:

> The first, best, and easiest way is to send your copyrighted story (or book) to an accredited agent and have the agent submit it to the producer. Incidentally, whether or not you employ an agent to do this, the producers, themselves employ readers whose job it is to ferret through all published work searching for screen material. However, it is generally best to beat your own drum and get an agent to submit your work, rather than trusting that the producers' readers will stumble over your work and like it. (141)

This early awareness of a changing market presages perhaps the most significant factor in the agent's rise to power: Hollywood. As publishers began selling film, radio, and serial rights, the terms of contracts became increasingly bloated; agents were becoming indispensible through the acquisition of specialized knowledge. With collaboration between the Hollywood studios and the publishing industry in New York, publishers were eager to exploit new markets and expand revenue streams.[31] Agents who represented authors through this expansion adopted a much more aggressive style through the

[31] Coser, Kadushin, and Powell, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*; Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*.

negotiation of film rights.[32] Coser, Kadushin, and Powell call these agents "packagers": they "attempt finely orchestrated deals in which film rights, hardcover rights and paperback or film rights, and soft cover novelizations are contracted together in one neat bundle" (301). Though the trend toward "packaging," would not arrive in earnest until the 1970s, the beginnings of this trend speak to the mounting tension around agency: with the growth of the industry came the need for specialized knowledge, even as publishers resisted the encroachment of a "middleman."

Several other factors at midcentury contributed to the agent's rise. *Writer's Market* began devoting increased space to subsidiary rights. Subsidiary rights (the right to publish in different formats, i.e., hardcover and paperback) became an increasingly important point of negotiation as paperback publishers began crowding out the marketplace. "Foreign Market Agents" were given a designated listing section as the publishing industry became increasingly interconnected overseas. Each of these changes led to a more complex contract, and a larger potential payout; the scale at which each book sale took place was far greater in the 1960s and 70s than it had been in the 30s and 40s. Even traditional book sales scaled up during the 1960s and 70s with the growth of the bookstore chain, leading to an increased book production and distribution.[33] Bookstore chains and wholesale retailers, began selling copies by the thousands—and authors and publishers stood to make far more

[32] For more on Hollywood agency, see J.D. Connor, *The Studio After the Studios: Neoclassical Hollywood (1970-2000)*. Connor's work overlaps more concretely with the expansion of publishing in the 1980s, and demonstrates how Hollywood agency similarly responded to international mergers and acquisitions. Connor identifies three large agencies in the 1970s and 80s—William Morris, International Creative Artists, and Creative Artists Agency. William Morris now maintains a book division within the reformed William Morris Endeavor, and has recruited agents that apprenticed under the so-called "super-agents" of the 1980s book industry. CAA does not represent authors.

[33] See Thompson, 61.

money. Between increased entertainment and subsidiary rights and the growth of chain stores, the fortunes of literary agents improved dramatically; as John Tebbel argues baldly, "agents became truly important when, for the first time, it was possible for an author to make a million dollars on a book" (737). As the stakes increased for all parties involved in a publishing deal, agents were in a stronger position to argue for their importance to an author, and in a stronger position to negotiate on behalf of their author. As such, *Writer's Market* was singing a different tune about literary agents by 1980. The digest began to include articles describing the agent's useful qualities and advantages, particularly in regard to an expanding marketplace.

> No good agent will be happy selling your novel to a hardcover publisher, for instance; he'll also invest some time in selling it to a paperback house, to a movie producer, to a newspaper syndicate for serialization, to a book club, to a foreign publisher. To do this, the agent exercises connections and business experience the writer probably doesn't have. (749)

Agents were interviewed about their work; the benefits of agency—beyond simply "making the author's life easier"—were expanded upon at length. And new language began to appear: the agent "negotiates the best possible deal" (749).

The agent's rise to real prominence in the 1970s and 80s can be directly mapped on to the reorganization of publishing by international media conglomerates. Mergers and acquisitions began taking place in the 1960s in the United States, as the powerhouse publishers of the early 20th century began retiring (as in Random House acquiring Knopf in 1960). Media corporations began taking an interest in these growing, merged houses, and long-time publishers began selling to entertainment corporations to maximize profits. By

the 1980s, almost all houses were owned by multi-national corporations (initially the Big Seven, now down to the Big Five). Longtime editors and publishers began leaving the industry in direct response to conglomeration, whether in protest of the industry's increased corporatization or due to downsizing; many became agents. I interviewed a senior agent who got her start during the 1980s. She recounted, "There was a big blood bath around the time I went out on my own. A lot of people were let go at publishing houses, and suddenly a lot of the editors were becoming agents because there was no place for them to go… it was really a matter of how long you could stay in the game." The composition of the profession of literary agents was changing; not only were agents entering the field as young professionals, but seasoned editors were leaving their publishing houses in favor of agency.

As publishing houses' business practices became more apparent and moved away from the vaunted relational model, the nature of agency changed. In the 1970s and 80s emerged what John B. Thompson has called the "super agent." These agents, epitomized by Morton Janklow, came to publishing from outside the business. Janklow, an attorney, could not believe that authors were willing to sign away so many of their rights in contract negotiations; he began "negotiating from a position of strength," recognizing that, without authors, publishers cannot make money. "I walked into a bookstore one day…and I realized that nobody goes in and says, 'What's the latest from Knopf?... They say, 'Where's the new Crichton?'" (qtd. in Thompson 63). Janklow's legal savvy and aggression changed the standards for representation—and for the sizes of advances.

By 1990, *Writer's Market* was fully reflecting the ways that mergers and acquisitions had challenged the publishing industry's self-image, admitting that they could no longer

operate under the assumption that agents were optional. "In the area of book-length fiction, the need for an agent has become increasingly important. It is estimated that 90% of everything commercially published has been handled by agents" (918). The 1990 edition describes the mindset of the (then) Big Six, including the desire for the "big" book, skyrocketing author advances, and P&L statements. What had been described as an industry of trust and mutual regard in the 1930s and 1940s had become a cutthroat business in the 1990s; while *Writer's Market* had yet to change their indexing system and still relegated agents to the back of the book in 1990, it was clear that the editorial staff and the readership was adjusting course to reflect the new industry reality. By 2000, the listings for literary agents *preceded* the listings for book publishers (an editorial choice that has remained in place through the most recent 2017 edition) reflecting both the new industry reality and reader needs. And the verdict on self-representation? "Only a fool has himself for a client" (104).[34]

The Agent and the Contemporary Field

A word, then, on what agents actually *do* in the contemporary marketplace. Literary agents are the mediator between author and publisher. They receive hundreds, if not thousands, of unsolicited manuscripts from potential authors looking for representation, while also managing a slate of existing clients. At the most basic level, agents represent authors in publishing negotiations, drawing on a wealth of knowledge about the market, publishing houses, and contract law in order to secure the best possible deal for their clients. But the agent's work does not conclude after a book sale; she advocates for her

[34] Perkins, Lori. "How to Find (and Keep) the Right Agent." *Writer's Market*. 1999

client's interests throughout the entire process of bringing a book to market, advising on everything from the cover art to the editorial direction. Moreover, agents and authors become friends, as agents manage authors' careers in long term, seeing them through rejection and success alike; it is not uncommon to see a book dedicated to an agent who has made himself an invaluable ally and close friend.[35] While the professional functions of agency may seem straightforward, the agent's position in the literary field is remarkably complex. They facilitate a number of social, aesthetic, and economic relationships, and create the conditions such that other literary producers—authors and editors—can occupy their respective habitus. Authors are concerned about their book and their writing, while editors are concerned about the corporations to whom they are accountable; if an agent is doing her job well, she is ensuring the successful performance of both authorship and editorship. And while Bourdieu describes the literary field as structured by creators and producers, my interviews reveal that agents see themselves as both, and neither.

Over the course of six months, I interviewed four literary agents, each highly regarded in the industry and beyond. These agents are an elite group, at the top of their field; their clients are household names, award winners, bestsellers. Each represents "upmarket literary fiction," a term of industry shorthand to which we will return at length. Though participants share similarities, they are otherwise a diverse set: two men and two women, in various stages of their careers, at differing types of firms (boutique agencies, long-standing houses, international entertainment management firms), and in different locations (New York City and Los Angeles). Publishing has long been known as an "accidental profession," and this holds true amongst the agents that I interviewed. Each

[35] The first example of such a dedication that springs to mind is Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, dedicated to both Susan Golomb (his agent) and Jonathan Galassi (his editor).

participant intended to be a writer or editor, but each concluded that they enjoyed the work of developing an idea more than writing itself. This interest led them to editorial positions (which involve very little editing at the junior level), and on to agency, where they found the opportunity to work with authors and texts intensively. The rate at which this process occurred differed, primarily, based on how long the agent had been in the industry; veterans worked their way up through other professions in publishing, whereas the younger agents likely made this determination during college internships or in their early years in the business—in other words, agenting may be becoming less "accidental." Throughout this chapter, I quote participants at length, utilizing these interviews as my most valuable primary source.[36]

The agent must maintain a sense of the entirety of the field in order to appropriately position herself, and to manage the reputation and perception of each of her clients. Though the agent works solely at the behest of his client, the goal is successful publication for all parties involved. Yet, the language of facilitation alone does not begin to accurately describe the role that an agent plays in the development of a book. As I will show, an agent's taste, creative sense, and market savvy are brought to bear on a book from its earliest moments, positioning the agent less as a "go-between" than an active, creative collaborator in the contemporary literary field.

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[36] For the most part, their comments remain unedited, aside from the removal of any potential identifying information and adjustments to conform speech patterns to standard academic prose (i.e., removing verbal tics such as "like", "um", and "right?"). In instances in which participants have been edited, standard editorial marks are in place. Every effort was made to ensure that participants' comments are consistent with their original context. Though participants remain anonymous, I relied on member checking (sending participants a full transcript of their interview), allowing them the opportunity to edit comments for either content or context; none of my participants chose to edit transcripts.

Finally, then, on profits. The suspicion directed toward the agent historically stems from his close association with the fiduciary responsibilities of creative labor. Despite agents' embeddedness in the cultural field, they are still met with suspicion due to the commission-based structure of their work. My participants spoke very little of money. When participants did speak of profits, they spoke of the consistency between the size of the cultural contribution being made by their client, as they saw it, and the size of the advance that they received. Their clients received high advances, I was told, because their work was of an equally high quality, contributing to the world of letters writ large. Importantly, then, the agent's interposition between author and publisher allows the author to be both autonomous, in a Bourdieusian sense, and financially stable, when previously these two conditions maintained a mutually exclusive coexistence. The baseline for an advance, agents told me, is enough money so that authors can devote time to producing their next book; the goal is financial freedom, living fulfilling literary lives, free from the burdens of making ends meet. The successful agent is prestigious because she is able to unite the traditionally opposed domains of commerce and culture, even while allowing her client to remain unsullied by commercial and financial concerns.

While profit was of little concern to my participants, other forms of currency, such as taste and influence, were of great interest to them. In the context of a risky economic landscape, my participants were eager to discuss the ways that their taste and influence structure their interactions with all other cultural producers at work in the literary field, and are central to their self-definition, their understanding of their profession, and their view of the marketplace. In what follows, I discuss these central themes—taste, risk, and influence—that emerged from extensive interviews conducted over a four-month period.

Taken together, these interviews demonstrate the ways that taste is operationalized to control for risk, how the agent exercises her powerful influence over contemporary fiction, and the logic of the marketplace.

III. Play Ball

It is important to recognize that agents see themselves as members of a *literary* community first. Each participant spoke of their love of literature propelling them into the profession. Though these four agents are quite different in personality, they each spoke about "sit[ting] down and curl[ing] up with that book," and their love of sharing and discussing books with friends. (They were also each keenly aware of their tendency to speak in clichés when discussing literature.) As members of a literary community, participants expressed a sense of responsibility to the literary world. "There aren't that many people carrying on [the literary tradition] in terms of people that are at the nexus of writers in the world," one agent told me. "I feel a sense of duty to posterity, to the present, and the future." As any ethnographer would, I wondered if my participants weren't painting me too rosy a picture, eager to improve their admittedly mixed reputation. Maybe so: I was told that the first rule of being an agent is "always be pitching," and I was clearly an eager customer. While it would be easy to take a cynical stance toward participants' responses, I resist the too-easy impulse to dismiss their sincerity as mere performance, or to dismantle these responses by calling attention to corporate overlords. But it would also be a mistake to take participants entirely at their word without appropriate—and necessary—critical skepticism. Let us assume, momentarily, that the pursuit of a sale *is* far less important to agents than the literary future that they are helping to produce and

preserve. By even the most inclusive measure of the canon, so few books escape the slaughterhouse of literature. The "literary tradition" cannot and will not be preserved or furthered with every book an agent represents; of course their language is aspirational, and unrealistic—and, of course, they know it. It seems less significant to ask if agents are being genuine in their responses or merely pitching than it is to ask why it might necessary to speak in terms of literary stewardship or cultural value in the first place—especially when the odds of finding such a book are so slim. It is with this principle in mind that I analyzed each of my interviews—rather than evaluating participants comments for their relative "authenticity" or their "falsehood," I understand these interviews as acts of position-taking, even as they address the ways in which agents function in the literary field.

Taste

"Taste" is currency in the publishing industry's system of symbolic capital—the prestige, status, and reputation accorded to a publishing house, which interacts with and depends on with other forms of capital (economic, human, intellectual, social, etc.) variously.[37] Agents are known for and by their tastes. I was told that in order to be successful, agents must, "Believ[e] that they have a certain ability, a certain vision, a certain idea of what other people might like to read. And then believ[e] in their own taste." While a collective belief in the agent's taste solidifies reputation, the agent's belief in his own taste is perceived to make or break a career. "You stand on your own taste," one agent told me, succinctly. In Bourdieusian language, the agent's particular struggle within the field of cultural production is that of defining the discourse surrounding a particular work of art

[37] See Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*, 6.

(the book that they are representing) and the field itself (the novel in the 21st century, say, or the quasi-genre of "literary fiction"). That discourse is a constant referendum on an agent's taste, her ability to see and know aesthetic quality within the field as she has defined it.[38] Publishers trust the taste of agents with whom they work (and lunch) regularly; when an agent's taste is deemed to be good, her client's manuscript is more likely to be read. Though taste is an ineffable concept, developed in accordance with social class, education, and cultural exposure, the agents I interviewed have cultivated their reputations for good taste according to two primary measures: selectivity and uniqueness. They are selective about the books that they represent, and they prefer to represent books that buck trends.

To be known as a highly selective agent is to delimit the field of cultural production narrowly. In their reputation for selectivity, agents align themselves with the literary elite; they are interested, only, in representing books of lasting cultural value import: "Great Novels," to use one interviewee's words. "What I really want is to read something and to be able to tell somebody else about it immediately. But that only happens, literally, once or twice a year," one agent told me.

> There's not that much great stuff! … When I see agents who sell 12, they're sending out a novel every month, I think to myself, 'I don't believe. I really do not believe that there are 12 great novels written in a year, much less that I would represent all of them.' But that has a kind of advantage, which is that when I do send something out, people sit up and pay attention to it.

[38] This Bourdieusian formulation of taste draws on the relationship between "*voir"* and "*savoir*," and which locates the relationship between pure sight and cultural knowledge in social class and education. See in particular "Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgment of Taste."

Selectivity conveys exacting and sophisticated taste, which benefits *both* the agent *and* the authors he represents. To be represented by one of these agents is, in itself, a stamp of approval for an author, and books that these agents represent are well regarded by publishing houses; for every book these agents represent, there are dozens of rejects wasting away in slush piles. As such, the few books that an agent *does* represent serve as a direct reflection on his taste. An agent described an enormously successful client by saying, "He represents my best taste." Though taste is hard to measure, dependent on a number of socioeconomic factors, an agent's backlist is a clear representation of his or her taste—for better or for worse.

Furthermore, selectivity aligns an agent's interests with the literary over the commercial.[39] One agent told me, "I turn down work, the opportunity to work with people who have come to me…or I decide not to reach out to people all the time who I'm quite sure would be worth a lot to book publishers, because I wouldn't be proud to have them on my list." These comments illustrate the ways in which taste is not only an exercise in literary selection, but an exercise in personal classification. Bourdieu writes, "Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" ("Distinction" 7). In rejecting more than they accept—and, effectively, turning down their cut of potential advances—these agents distance themselves from the popular image of the enterprising huckster out to make a quick buck (though, as we will see, they are quite willing to talk

[39] Selectivity as a measure of taste may well be an effect of the types of literature and writers that these agents represent—upmarket literary fiction—in contrast to the "agents who… send out a novel every month," which may be associated with different ("lowbrow," for lack of a better term) genres and/or readership.

about the financial reward due to the author). In aligning their tastes with the work that they represent, and in pursuing only the work which makes them proud, these agents demonstrate the ways in which their own exercise in personal taste ("All I can know is that I love it") and taste-making ("I feel a sense of duty to posterity") are inextricably linked.

Because of their exacting tastes, the agents that I interviewed represent very few authors. They take a particular pride in delivering something "different" to publishers. I pressed on this point, asking, "What do you look for in a manuscript?" Certainly, I presumed, agents with their level of success must have some metric according to which they evaluate new work. Yet each participant struggled to answer this question, resulting in variations of the Stewartian, "I know it when I see it." The very fact that this question was difficult to answer, I think, speaks to the openness with which each participant approaches representation. Quite simply, they do not look for anything *specific* when reading a new manuscript. Three of the four participants expressed a desire to read something "new" and "fresh": "Publishers think of me for something new and different. Which I think has always been kind of my MO. And I hope that I can continue to operate that way," one agent told me.

The insistence that they were representing new and different writers emerged primarily in response to my questions about literary trends. I asked each agent how they think about current trends when they take on a new novel. Several participants seemed mildly offended; it was clear that I had misstepped in asking such a question. They responded with variations on a theme: "I don't chase trends." I asked about research that claims to have "cracked the code" of bestselling fiction—admittedly, searching for a nerve to strike. [40] "The work that I represent confounds codes," one agent told me. Agents with

[40] See Jockers and Archer, *The Bestseller Code*.

their level of prestige can operate independently of trends, so it would seem. They see themselves primarily as trendsetters, while the "novel-a-month" agents are those who cash in on trends. Tellingly, two agents cracked the same joke in response to this question. One told me, "[Publishers say] *Twilight* sold, so let's do *Twilight*... in green! *Twilight*... in the morning! At dawn! High noon!" Another quipped, "It's the girl in the *boat*, the girl in the *cabin*, the girl *in cabin 10*," referencing the titular trend in psychological thrillers. "It's sort of like, you have to put a place and girl in the title and people will say, 'Oh, okay!'" Their disdain for the trendy was palpable. While this is certainly particular to the type of fiction that these agents represent, the persistence of this joke illuminates the ways in which taste is operationalized. The agent's ability to seize upon something in a manuscript that is unusual—her ability to recognize a glimmer of potential in what less-practiced readers may dismiss as odd—distinguishes her as an insightful, visionary reader. (Though it is her ability to envision a market for that book, and to convince a publisher of that market, that makes her a skillful agent.)

In the case of all manuscripts, but particularly the books that purport to be "different," the agent's taste is defined by her ability to see what *could be* in a manuscript. Agents do not receive books; they receive unfinished, unpolished manuscripts. Through the act of editing and representing a manuscript, they confer upon it the status of a work of art. That an agent might be so insightful as to see what others do not (or cannot) suggests a high level of "cultural competence" on her part, to borrow Bourdieu's phrase. "Nothing is more distinctive," Bourdieu writes, "more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common,'" ("Distinction" 6). Any agent will tell you there are few things more commonplace than unfinished manuscripts,

overflowing inboxes. Agents may *receive* manuscripts, but they *sell* books. If that book is particularly different from that which is dominating the marketplace—whether in its groundbreaking form, its freshness of voice, its diversity in perspective, or its explorative content— and it performs well, commercially and critically, then all the more insightful was the agent who saw the potential in that book. If that book is commercially and critically successful—if in exercising her good taste the agent also becomes a tastemaker—then she has succeeded.

Risk

Personal and professional taste is all that an agent can rely on because publishing is a notoriously risky business. As agents tend to authors careers over time, and develop friendships with their clients, they align themselves with the emotional risks of vulnerability and rejection so prevalent for hopeful authors: "It can be heartbreaking, when you work very, very hard on a book and you can't find any editor to buy it," let alone "sending the thing out into the world after working on it for two, or three, or ten years and risking everything from it being utterly ignored (which is more often than not what happens) to it being hailed as the greatest novel of the 21st century, to being pilloried and slaughtered in the pages of *The New York Times*." Moreover, publishing involves a great deal of financial risk. Most books do not turn a profit; many do not even break even. John B. Thompson quotes a business manager at a major New York house as saying, "On the new hardbacks we're putting out each year, probably half lose money and half make money, but only 30 per cent really exceed what we're looking for. And it's really the top 10 per cent that make all the difference. A smaller number of books are now accounting for a larger share of the revenue" (211). Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton report, "7 out of every 10

frontlist hardbound books fail financially (i.e., they do not earn enough to cover the author's advance and other editorial, marketing, and overhead costs), 2 books break even, and 1 is a hit" (30). Readers are asked to purchase new fiction sight unseen, according only to the buzz skillfully generated by publicists; publishers must guess how likely the book is to sell, and in what quantity. While agents can generate buzz amongst publishers prior to a book auction (thereby increasing the size of the advance and securing much-needed marketing buy-in from publishers), they cannot do much to ensure that readers gravitate toward their book.

Publishers and agents attempt to create stability within this uncertain marketplace. As we will see in chapter 2, publishers rely on Profit & Loss statements when purchasing a book, evaluating a new submission according to books that have sold well in the past (posing a challenge to agents whose reputations are staked on representing "unique" books). Agents have found that the larger advance they can secure from the publisher, the harder a publisher will work to market and sell a book, in order to earn back their advance. Often, the books with the largest advances are the ones that end up on the front page of a publisher's quarterly catalogue, or are exhibited at the major bookselling conventions, as in the case of *The Art of Fielding* and books of its stature. Yet, each of these strategies is but an attempt to create stability in a fundamentally unstable, unpredictable business. One agent described the uncertainty from her vantage point, saying, "Just when you think you know what to expect, it's never that book that does what it's supposed to do. The book that [publishers] buy for a million dollars, like, 'Oh it's going to be big,' – it's not that title that's going to be big. It's the one that someone buys for $15,000 and is a complete surprise that people all fall in love with that takes off!"

But the biggest risk that agents of literary fiction also must absorb is the delayed temporality of prestige. Literary fiction is a risky type of work to represent because, unlike commercial fiction's consistent and eager market, literary fiction's recognition is often conferred after the fact—sometimes, very long after. "Uncertainty" and "randomness" are inherent in the production of any cultural good, literary fiction included.[41] Quite simply, literary fiction does not sell as much as commercial fiction upon its immediate release. Yet, commercial fiction quickly fades from public interests, while literary fiction maintains steady, if smaller, sales over time. Andrew Wylie, one of the so-called "super agents" of the 1980s, pioneered this risky tactic. Wylie changed the profession by prioritizing the backlist: choosing to forego the pursuit of the blockbuster author, and favoring instead those authors whose work has "lasting value."[42] Wylie thus directed his attention to the canon, delivering a stable revenue over time under the presumption that books of high quality sell longer and steadier than the blockbusters with their quickly dated trends. According to Wylie, "The best business is to have on your roster one hundred authors who will be read in a hundred years, not two authors who will be read in a hundred days" (qtd. in Thompson 66). While agents have always been concerned about prestige, their emphasis on their backlists over current clients— to be sure, a Wylie-influenced strategy—emphasizes their attention to the delayed gratification of prestige. Representing literary fiction—that which "confounds codes"—over the surefire trends, is risky in the short-term; agents and

[41] As opposed to commercial goods. See Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief," 97.
[42] Wylie's agency represents Martin Amis, Roberto Bolaño, Karl Ove Knausgaard and Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, as well as the estates of WG Sebald, Susan Sontag, Jorge Luis Borges, and the Royal Shakespeare Company—an undeniably impressive client list. Wylie gained his reputation by poaching authors from agents, frowned upon then as now.

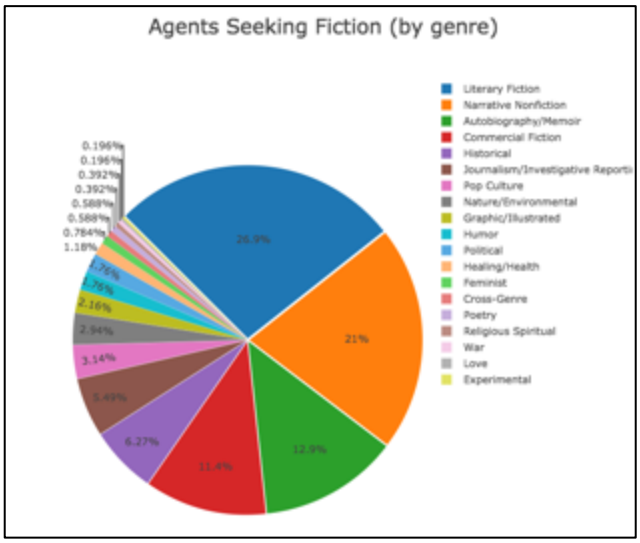
publishers who produce literary fiction must be willing to absorb initial losses in favor of long-term financial stability.

In Bourdieusian terms, this is a clear alignment of the agent (and his or her firm) with cultural work, as opposed to commercial business (or toward the cultural "pole," rather than the commercial "pole," in his characteristic diagrams). Commercial fiction "minimize[s] risks by adjusting in advance to the identifiable demand… to ensure a rapid return of profits through rapid circulation of products with built-in obsolescence" (97). By contrast, agents of literary fiction must accept that their goals are future-oriented, as a much smaller market exists in the present. Agents who invest in literary fiction *as cultural products* are distinguished by their ability "to sense the specific laws of a market yet to come," recognizing that "classics" are simply "best-sellers over the long run" (100). Not only do agents of literary fiction understand the market in the short term, but they also understand the field of cultural production in the long term, and they stake their reputations on that understanding. Their tastes and vision will only be justified in time.

Though literary fiction makes up only a small portion of books published annually and is risky to represent, it is apparently the most desirable type of book to represent, challenging popular assumptions about the agent's commercial rapacity. Agents market themselves to potential clients based on the type of work that they prefer to represent; authors must independently classify their work and match it to an agent's interests in order for their pitch to be successful: literary fiction vs. commercial fiction, memoir, narrative nonfiction, and so on. In online databases (Poets & Writers, the Association of Author Representatives, Writers Market, etc.), my participants each identify their primary interest as "literary fiction"; it would be rare that a potential author would pitch a bodice-ripping

romance or vampire novel to one of these agents. A survey of the Poets & Writers agent database, one industry clearinghouse that allows agents to list the types of work that they are interested in representing and representative clients, reveals that my participants are not alone in their desire to represent literary fiction (though they have few professional equals).[43] Each of the 116 agents included in the database lists multiple desired genres, but the overwhelming desired genre is "literary fiction." (See fig. 1).

Figure 1: Agents identify themselves to potential clients, to publishers, and to other industry insiders by their preferred genre to represent, according to data obtained by *Poets & Writers* clearinghouse (n=116).



All agents represent both fiction and nonfiction, which accounts for the relative parity between literary fiction and narrative nonfiction, and autobiography/memoir and commercial fiction. But the preeminence of literary fiction is notable: approximately 27% of agents want to represent literary fiction, over and above any other category. According to this data, literary fiction is twice as desirable as commercial fiction. Furthermore, the smaller segments of the graph (historical, journalism, pop culture) hardly represent the

[43] The Association of Authors' Representatives includes a much more comprehensive member list, but the data is inconsistent between members. Literary agency is an entirely unregulated profession, and-- to date-- there remains no comprehensive data about the number of literary agents practicing in the United States.

sort of commercial fiction that crowds the market, such as romance, crime, and sci-fi. By contrast, the *New York Times* bestseller list as of February 26, 2017 includes:

Combined Print and E-Book Fiction

1. *Echoes in Death* by JD Robb
2. *Norse Mythology* by Neil Gaiman
3. *A Dog's Purpose* by W. Bruce Cameron
4. *A Man Called Ove* by Frederik Backman
5. *The Shack* by William P. Young

Hardcover Fiction

1. *Norse Mythology* by Neil Gaiman
2. *Echoes in Death* by JD Robb
3. *Never Never* by James Patterson and Candice Fox
4. *The Whistler* by John Grisham
5. *Right Behind You* by Lisa Garner

The contrast could not be clearer. These lists are comprised almost entirely of commercial fiction. In other words, the fiction that agents *desire* to represent (or *claim to* desire to represent) is clearly mismatched with what is financially successful (commercial fiction) in the contemporary marketplace. What to make of this disparity?

It would seem, first, that risk is a motivating factor for many agents, certainly in part due to the potential for prestige associated with literary fiction over commercial fiction. As for literary fiction's popularity: it would appear that, as with any number of corporate scenarios, the greater the risk, the greater the reward. But, as with the desire to further the literary tradition, this database reflects aspirations as much as, if not more than, reality.

Whether or not the agents represented in this database *actually* represent literary fiction is another story entirely. Consider, for instance, the case of JD Robb—a pseudonym for Nora Roberts—who appears on both the hardcover and e-book bestseller lists. Robb/Roberts is a heavy-hitting, name brand commercial author, spanning two types of genre fiction (crime for Robb, romance for Roberts). Roberts' agent, Amy Berkower, works at a prestigious agency, Writer's House, and is included in the Poets & Writers database. Though Robb/Roberts is enormously successful, and surely accounts for much of Berkower's annual commissions, Berkower does not list Robb/Roberts among her Representative Clients. This exclusion seems counter-intuitive. Financials aside, Robb/Roberts' success surely speaks to Berkower's expert representation in developing an author into a brand name with intergenerational reach, even suggesting a nom de plume to ease Roberts' transition into a new genre. Certainly, Berkower may be interested in diversifying her list. But this exclusion also speaks to the instrumentalization of risk as agents position themselves in the field. No matter what type of work an agent represents, they should aspire to (or must appear as though they aspire to) represent literary fiction and to assume the correlated risks.[44]

The riskiness of the publishing business seems to have motivated agents to pursue this line of work, as opposed to, say, editing. Though potentially risky, agency allows for a higher level of artistic autonomy, as they see it. The risk inherent in "stand[ing] on your own taste," has a great appeal to the agents with which I spoke. In part, this has much to do with the potential association with "genius" authors—to be the person whose taste was

[44] The performance is happening on a few levels, here: both for each other as well as for potential authors.

good enough to pluck David Foster Wallace out of a slush pile and to take a risk on the dense and heady prose. More to the point, however, agents do operate with greater freedom in their profession, particularly as corporate media practices have changed the ways that editors and publishers operate on a day-to-day basis. “Unlike publishing houses that work by committee… I never have to say to anyone, ‘I'd like to do this, will you let me?’” A sort of entrepreneurial spirit underpins the agent’s willingness to take on risk—and, in particular, the freedom from the strictures of permission and authority inherent in the hierarchical conglomerates.

> I can bet on myself…Whereas [editors] are in this world where success meant getting people to not say no-- like, getting your boss to let you buy a book. And I realized that I would much rather be on the side or in a job where no one can tell me no. I might fail by putting my time and energy into a book that nobody wanted, but I couldn't fail because someone wouldn't let me put my time and energy into a book.

A belief in taste as a precaution against risk is one of the fundamental ways that agents position themselves and their work in the field of cultural production. Taste and risk go hand-in-hand in the high-stakes contemporary publishing industry, and agents appear to be motivated by both equally. The intensity of the risk seems—by necessity—to boost an agent’s confidence in his taste, while also injecting the prospect of failure into aesthetic appreciation. But the pursuit of books of good taste *at all costs* also stands as a bulwark against risk because it shifts the motivation away from the commercial; the pursuit of “the feeling” and the love of books and the literary future becomes a self-justifying task, independent of the financials.

Influence

An agent's taste extends far beyond determining which books they like and which they don't. And the risks that they face can be managed. Throughout my interviews, the collaborative nature of the agent-author relationship emerged as the most significant way that an agent exercises influence—extending to the form and content of contemporary fiction. At some point between the spark of recognition that a manuscript *could be* great and collecting on an advance, something happens between the agent, the author, and the book; this collision is at the heart of contemporary literary production.

Consider how this agent describes the way he understands his position in the publishing industry:

> It's really important that I maintain a perspective that [my clients] should never have to think about, which is how they fit in to the larger economy of what is a for-profit business. And that is, at the end of the day, how they are seen by the people who run the companies that publish them. Now, their editors might see their relationship in terms of primarily artistic and personal ones, just like I do in many ways, but that editor works for someone. And that editor-in-chief reports to someone, and at the end of the day, those people are working for companies that do hundreds of millions if not billions of dollars in revenue every year, and the people at the top don't care about *my* author. You know? Unless my author is, like, John Grisham. Exceptions aside, they don't. My job is to maintain that structural perspective… all relationships are driven by labor and production and surplus value. And literary production is no different. And it's easy for a writer to forget or just

> never be aware of that. I kind of see my job as helping them use this giant capitalist apparatus to get their work into the hands of as many people as possible. I don't know if that's the best way to do it, but it's the only way to do it.

This insightful and telling comment reveals a mode of thinking that is necessary for an agent to perform her role well—what this participant calls a "structural perspective." The agent must work at multiple scales at once, considering both the workings of a billion-dollar industry, the particular demands placed on editors, and how an individual author—shielded from these concerns—can become financially and symbolically profitable. As Bourdieu theorized, the artist must remain distinct from the mechanisms of economic capital as a means of securing symbolic capital and prestige in the short-term. This position is inherently contradictory. Even as collusion with the market challenges the autonomy of the artist and the work, economic freedom is necessary as "the basis of self-assurance, audacity, and indifference to profit—dispositions which, together with the flair associated with possession of a large social capital and the corresponding familiarity with the field…are often the most profitable symbolically" (68). In part, the agent resolves the contradiction of cultural autonomy and financial stability for the artist, managing the financials such that the author can maintain what appears to be an economically unsullied state.[45] Without financial pressures, the author is free to write her next book—the ultimate goal for an agent representing a first-time author—and the agent creates a continuous revenue stream for himself, the author, and the publisher. Sustaining the image of the author's creative autonomy, however, has another objective: effacing the degree of agent's

[45] See Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief."

own collaborative influence in literary production—and, relatedly, the influence of multimedia conglomerates. In what follows, I argue that much of what agents have identified as their personal taste is, in fact, more likely a taste for literary fiction *preferred by corporate publishers.* In exerting their influence, agents exercise a corporate creativity, directing the supposedly autonomous creative process toward the tastes of the publishing corporations that will ultimately purchase the books they represent. An examination of the agent's creative influence not only reveals a model of collaboration that is often overlooked in the contemporary marketplace, it also reveals the extent of corporate influence on contemporary fiction from the earliest stages of literary production. Once an agent is involved, I argue, artistic creativity is no longer distinct from corporate influence. The agent's positionality as intermediary between author and publisher both conceals and betrays the extent of corporate influence over literary production.

As the above comment indicates, agents are keenly aware of how their authors "are seen by the people who run the companies that publish them." In managing the reception of both author and book, agents create the conditions to which publishers will respond favorably. Because of their high-level, "structural perspective," their individual tastes are carefully calibrated to the tastes of corporate houses. Participants partly described this as "thinking like publishers." One agent described how publishers' concerns shape her decisions to represent new titles:

> Part of my thinking is, "What are the nonfiction handles that can help sell a book?" Because that's how publishers are thinking. They're like, "Could this author get on a talk show and talk about these things? Or could this author be

> part of a larger article on this cultural phenomenon." So, publishers are thinking in those ways, so I have to think that way, too.

Despite their initial response—"I can only know that I love it"—this comment reveals the way that an agent considers publishers' metrics when adjudicating a new title, down to a book's marketing. An agent may love a book, and they may want to recommend it to others, but it is unlikely that she will represent it if it will not sell. Each participant told a variation of the same story: they represented a book that they believed to be brilliantly written, but no publisher would buy it. Their "unique" taste did not result in a sale. "It can be heartbreaking, when you work very, very hard on a book and you can't find any editor to buy it," one participant told me. Another joked wryly, "I've spoken to many, many, weeping clients. Which probably doesn't happen if you're a banker." To avoid such heartbreak, an agent's tastes must be in step with that of publishers, despite claims to the contrary. Either the agent can represent a book that she knows will sell—the trendy—or she can package a novel in a manner that will persuade editors, guiding the author through the revision process to develop the book into something desirable even to the most skittish of publishers. Prestigious agents, like my participants, choose the latter, "us[ing] this giant capitalist apparatus to get their work into the hands of as many people as possible." This is not to say that my participants were disingenuous in their claims to represent "different" books, or in their concern for posterity. But even the most brilliant books need brilliant representation if they are to escape a publisher's slush pile, let alone receive a handsome advance or make their way into the hands of readers.

To that end, agents exercise an increasing amount of editorial and creative influence over a book's preproduction. I was told, "Good agents are editing agents"; "I do a ton of

editorial work. As much as I want to"; "At least half of the books I've sold, I do more editorial work before sale than the editor does afterward." That is, agents do more than simply deliver up a finished product. So important is the agent's creativity that the decision to represent a new client often rests on the potential to shape the manuscript. An agent needs to know how much creative leeway she has before signing a new client; the more collaboration, the better. One agent told me,

> I want to feel like, if there were to be a contest to compete for the book—four agents in a room—that I would be 100% sure that I would win. It's not just that I want to recognize that the book is really good and that other people will like it. I want to feel like I know how to talk about it and I know how to represent it. Because then I can be a meaningful part of the process.

Said another way, agents ask themselves, "How much can you shape a book with an author? How much can you not do? If I don't know how to *fix it*, then I shouldn't take it on" (emphasis mine). It is in these "fixes" that the agent becomes the administrator of corporate taste.

It is not surprising that agents have developed a knack for editorial work. They *enjoy* it, they all told me: this creative interest propelled them into the industry in the first place. Moreover, they insisted that early editorial oversight is necessary in today's industry. Careful editing is an insurance policy against busy editors and potential negative reviews. And editors are less and less likely to bid on an unfinished manuscript: "There's a greater expectation that the material that is submitted to publishers will be closer to finished than not…[it's] easier to create excitement and competition around an almost perfect work than it is an obviously flawed but very, very promising work." The work of "fixing" a book, then,

is the process of transforming a manuscript from flawed-but-promising into (what an editor will deem) almost-perfect. Overall, participants told me, the changes they make to books are minor (shifting from present tense to past, to name one example). Yet, as they discussed structural issues to which they are generally attentive—length ("This book would be great if only it were 100 pages shorter"), characterization ("Why did this character do this? It didn't make sense," or "Making a character more believable"), plot structuring ("Making it tighter," or helping an author to "land the ending"), and pacing ("Making a book take off faster")—it became clear that their editorial influence is, in fact, extensive. Agents often exercise oversight when "telling your writer when something isn't ready, telling them that they need to work on it some more… before a manuscript ever gets to a publishing house." As a gatekeeper to publishing houses, agents exercise a great amount of control over a manuscript—a power they freely exercise.

The agent-author relationship is a symbiotic creative collaboration that should not be taken for granted; they depend on one another for financial success and cultural distinction. This model of creative collaboration is at the heart of the contemporary literary field. While I have only recounted a few representative quotations, I cannot overstate the frequency with which all of my participants discussed their role in preparing a book for publishers, the importance they placed on this work, and the consistency of the language that they used. I contend that this is the most significant dimension of agency in the contemporary: in the conflation of personal and corporate tastes, agents enact a sort of corporate creativity, challenging the potential for authorial autonomous creativity even as they purport to make such autonomy possible through their financial management. By downplaying their involvement—by insisting that their "fixes" are minor and that their

relationship with authors is strictly fiduciary—agents maintain the fiction of art's distinction from capital and mask the increased corporatization of literary creativity.[46]

What is "corporate taste," then? What is "almost perfect" for an acquisitions editor? My participants spoke of one measure, in particular: "upmarket" fiction, the clear generic preference of the Big Five. The term "upmarket" circulates primarily within the industry as a way of describing a certain market for literary fiction; it emerged from advertising, and is not a specifically literary term. The term was not used originally to describe books, per se, but any product located toward the more expensive end of the market thanks to either "advertising or actual improvement."[47] "Upmarket" has less to do with the qualities of the product than the degree to which that product lends itself to marketing and advertising. Distinct from historic concepts such as the middlebrow, the category of upmarket *fiction* seems to have emerged in the final stages of mergers and acquisitions, in which publishing houses were acquired by international media conglomerates. Succinctly defined, upmarket fiction is "literary fiction with commercial appeal." Upmarket fiction is less an evaluation of literary quality than market share. That is not to say, however, that quality is entirely incidental to upmarket fiction; indeed, upmarket fiction is a particular type of *literary* fiction, a quasi-genre that lays claim to more sophisticated language and artful style than its

[46] The myth of authorial genius is also bound up in this process. For as much as the agent's role in the creative process clearly contradicts the myth of authorial genius, agents still promote this myth often. Indeed, they benefit from it; if an author is a genius, than an agent is also a genius for recognizing her, for taste classifies the classifier. And, certainly, a cursory glance at the hagiography around David Foster Wallace or Karl Ove Knausgaard suggests that "genius" is a lucrative platform.

[47] "'up-market, adj. and adv." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. 13 July 2017.

commercial counterparts.[48] Yet, upmarket fiction draws on themes that motivate commercial fiction, appealing to both the die-hard reader of a genre and the discerning reader of literary fiction (so the logic goes). One of my participants highlighted Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* as a key example of the upmarket: a war novel about a young boy, on the one hand, that is also historical fiction about a young girl coming-of-age, on the other. Appealing to admittedly untested stereotypes about what men and women read, both within the context of commercial and literary fiction, the agent praised Doerr, his publisher, and his agent for their strategic brilliance in understanding all levels of the marketplace and incorporating those interests into a work of literary fiction.

Given its large market-share, upmarket fiction is especially desirable for publishers. It satisfies both the desire to produce quality literature (prestige) and the corporate incentives to sell as many units as possible (profit). As the desired literary genre for the Big Five, upmarket literary fiction tells us a great deal about corporate taste. At the nexus of prestige and profit, books that distill the preferences of the Big Five are fashionable, but not trendy; smart, but not snobby; thrilling, but not edgy; relatable, but not familiar; fresh, but not experimental. More than anything, the Big Five want books that their marketing teams can convince anyone to read.

This, then, is the target that agents are always trying to hit. These are the books that receive the fiercest representation, the most competitive auctions, and the biggest advances. They may be of a high quality on their own, but they require a certain type of packaging—a perfectly tuned pitch—to help a publisher see their potential as "almost perfect" works of upmarket fiction. It is no small wonder that my participants highlighted

[48] On the "quasi-genre genre" of literary fiction, see Matthew Wilkens, "Genre, Computation, and the Varieties of Twentieth-Century U.S. Fiction."

key components of upmarket fiction when discussing their editorial decisions: pacing, characterization, accessibility, and the "larger cultural phenomena" with which an author can engage. Designed for the marketplace, upmarket is thus a central aesthetic and generic category for literature in the age of multimedia conglomerates. In what follows, I read one such example of a highly agented, upmarket book, *The Art of Fielding*, analyzing its allegorization of the literary field as highlighting the contours of (corporate) creativity in the contemporary.

IV. *The Art of Fielding*

The Art of Fielding (2011) demonstrates the potential fruitfulness for reading the backend of literary production. *The Art of Fielding* follows the fortunes of characters at Westish College, a fictional university in the Midwest: central to this story is Henry Skrimshander, an improbably talented shortstop who has garnered attention from Major League scouts, thanks to the training of catcher, team captain, and best friend Mike Schwartz. Henry, who has maintained an error-free collegiate record, makes a bad throw that lands a teammate in the hospital; Schwartz, meanwhile, is rejected from law school. Henry, Mike, and the entire team are thrown into a tailspin, a collective crisis of confidence about their ability to "make it" in their competitive fields of choice. Schwartz succeeds only when (if) Henry succeeds. Moreover, *Fielding* allegorically emplots a number of the mechanisms by which the marketplace runs—the pitch, the auction, the advance—and the manner of structural thinking that generates a successful book sale. That *Fielding* received such aggressive representation by an agent who so clearly identified with its central premises further solidifies its commentary on the state of the field.

The Art of Fielding is an excellent example of a book that is perfectly attuned with corporate tastes, an upmarket book at its finest. At once a sports novel about baseball players, it is easy to forget that *Fielding* is also a campus novel, a classic bildungsroman about self-discovery, youth, and idealism, that discusses baseball in the most literary fashion possible (and with no small measure of pomposity):

> Nineteen seventy-three. In the public imagination it was as fraught a year as you could name: Watergate, *Roe v. Wade*, withdrawal from Vietnam. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Was it also the year that Prufrockian paralysis went mainstream—the year it entered baseball? It made sense that a psychic condition sensed by the artists of one generation—the Modernists of the First World War—would take a while to reveal itself throughout the population. And if that psychic condition happened to be a profound failure of confidence in the significance of individual human action, then the condition became an epidemic when it entered the realm of utmost confidence in the same: the realm of professional sport. In fact, that might make for a workable definition of the postmodernist era: an era when even the Athletes were anguished Modernists. In which case the American postmodern period began in spring 1973, when a pitcher named Steve Blass lost his aim. *Do I dare, and do I dare?*

These musings from Westish College president Guert Affenlight enact the process of developing upmarket fiction, in addition to serving as an excellent example of the sort of work that gets pushed as upmarket. Glad-handing with major league scouts, Affenlight struggles to find something to discuss with these men who are entirely unlike him, both in social class and educational status. So literary history becomes the history of baseball as

Affenlight tries—poorly, earnestly—to make his work more accessible. As is evident from this lengthy quote, the pressures and competitive logic of academia and baseball quickly reproduce those of the literary field. The novel seems to take this musing as it's central premise, as Henry experiences a degree of "Prufrockian paralysis" in his defensive game. The novel treats baseball and literature as equally serious—even self-serious—pursuits.

Importantly, *Fielding* allegorizes not only the state of the field writ large, but the nature of a collaborative relationship between agent and author in particular. The stakes of this creative relationship are made clear through Schwartz and Henry's friendship, clarifying what is lost and what is gained through such a close partnership. In its allegory, *The Art of Fielding* clarifies the nature of creativity for agents in the contemporary marketplace. Agent, author, and book are aligned; an agent is not merely representing an author, but is always also representing himself. With each book they sell, their own taste is on the line. With each author they represent, their own career hangs in the balance. Profits and losses, the logic behind any sale, are symbolic as well as financial.

But *Fielding* is not remarkable for simply being "about" the marketplace, on an allegorical level. Rather, *Fielding* demonstrates the ways in which representation directly occasions a book's reception. On the one hand, the story of *Fielding*'s production is typical: a young writer, graduate of an MFA program and owner of massive debt, toiled for 10 years on doorstop-sized novel until being catapulted, by chance, to the top of the bestseller lists with one of the most celebrated novels of the year. But, as Keith Gessen recounted in a *Vanity Fair* article turned Kindle Short, "How a Book Is Born," the story of *The Art of Fielding*'s success was almost entirely unremarkable in its publication and production

mechanisms.[49] Gessen recasts the book's key producers as players in a competitive game: "There was the author, Chad Harbach, who had spent a decade on a novel his friends thought he'd never finish. There was the agent, Chris Parris-Lamb, who recognized its potential. There was the editor, Little, Brown's Michael Pietsch, who won it in a high-stakes auction." Vision, competition, desperation: this is the contemporary marketplace, as told by *The Art of Fielding*. Before a word of the novel was released to the reading public, *Fielding* was made famous thanks to the high-profile auction. Parris-Lamb operated according to the agent's key assumption: the more a publisher pays in a book advance, the harder the publisher will work to ensure that the book gets into the hands of readers. Parris-Lamb ran a highly competitive book auction, which generated attention. The aggression paid off: Little, Brown ordered more galleys for *Fielding* than many books' total print run. It won the first page of the Little, Brown seasonal catalog, communicating to bookstores the novel's anticipated popularity and guiding their inventory decisions (subsequent first-page novels included the high-profile releases of Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* and Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*, for example). Yet, Parris-Lamb and Harbach were not guided by financial profit alone; symbolic prestige, too, informed their decisions. Tellingly, Little, Brown was not the highest bidder for *The Art of Fielding*; Harbach and Parris-Lamb ultimately sacrificed over $100,000 to work with Little, Brown when they received assurance that Michael Pietsch (editor of a late Ernest Hemingway novel and David Foster Wallace, among others, now CEO of Hachette Book Group) would *personally* edit the book. Though profit may have driven the negotiation, it was ultimately prestige that sealed the deal. Because of the initial

[49] It is worth noting that Gessen publishes Harbach's work at *n+1*, and the two are good friends, former college roommates. Inasmuch as "How a Book Is Born" is the story of Harbach's discovery and success, it is a story of *n+1,* the magazine's reputation as a daring intellectual coterie, and Gessen's reputation as its editor.

representation of the novel and each of the subsequent decisions, *The Art of Fielding* was virtually ensured a successful debut.

Fielding's narrative structure seems to emplot the literary agent's position in the field: a sort of formal "structural perspective," reproduced at the level of the text. Participants reported, "I think books right now have to be delivering on a lot of levels," one agent told me, emphasizing the many-tiered measures of success for a single novel. "That can be the sentences, that can be the characters, that can be the plot. Hopefully, all three are happening at the same time." Even as agents remain dutifully attentive to all levels of the publishing industry's workings, they remain attentive to each level of the book's structure. Again, at length,

> Good writing clicks… on the micro level. I'm also looking for that to happen on the macro level. Because, ultimately, good writing is necessary, but not sufficient, for a good book. That's another thing that a lot of people tend to overlook, especially the MFA culture with its narrow focus on shorter work. And it's something that authors like John Grisham or commercial writers whose plots are very well crafted don't get enough credit for from a literary audience. That's very hard to do. It's not necessarily telling a story, it's not necessarily about plot, but you're doing something over the length of a book that kind of becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

The ability to see and deliver at both the micro and the macro levels, to keep in mind the needs of a particular client or player while maintaining a view of the entire field: this is the literary field as seen by the agent, a positionality that *The Art of Fielding* reproduces allegorically and formally. As the novel alternates perspectives, shifting between four

central characters, it too becomes more than the sum of its parts. Each of our narrators—Henry, Schwartz, Affenlight, and his daughter Pella—provides a different vantage point on Henry's bout with Steve Blass disease, showing how Henry fits into the larger relational economy of the Westish Harpooners, how the Harpooners fit into the institutions of Westish College and the NCAA, and how Westish is positioned in the grand structure of higher education and intercollegiate athletics in the United States.[50] *Fielding* maintains a hold on all of these competing interests and realities, mirroring in its structure the sort of perspective maintained by literary agents—and, as we will see, by Schwartzy, the figure of the agent in *Fielding*.

Let us return, then, to the baseball diamond in Peoria, and the opening scene of *The Art of Fielding.* Mike Schwartz stands in awe of a scrawny shortstop. The kid had played just as many games as Schwartz had, in heat just as intense, but while Schwartz applies IcyHot patches, the shortstop returns to the field to drill.

> Though his motion was languid, the ball seemed to explode off his fingertips, to gather speed as it crossed the diamond. It smacked the pocket of the first baseman's glove with the sound of a gun going off. The coach hit another, a bit harder: same easy grace, same gunshot report…He barehanded a slow roller and fired to first on a dead run… Even at full speed, his face looked bland, almost bored, like that of a virtuoso practicing scales…where the kid's thoughts were—whether he was having any thoughts at all behind that blank

[50] It is worth noting that the books participants mentioned by name in our interviews are similarly structured, with chapters devoted to the third-person narration of individual characters: *Gone Girl* (2012), *All the Light We Cannot See* (2012), *Freedom* (2010), *Station Eleven* (2014), *City on Fire* (2015).

> look—Schwartz couldn't say. He remembered a line from Professor Eglantine's poetry class: *Expressionless, expresses God*. (5)

From its opening lines, *Fielding* collapses the space between the athletic and the literary at every turn. It's not hard to read shortstop Henry Skrimshander as a would-be writer, and this first meeting between Henry and Mike as the sort of discovery that launches literary careers. In these first pages, readers are invited to imagine the field of play as much broader than baseball alone, and to see in Henry's natural talent and striving the sort of "genius" that agents promote in their authors. Schwartz describes Henry both as a virtuosic musician, but also as a modernist poet (Professor Eglantine appears in the novel teaching course on "the dear dead anti-Semite Thomas Stearns Eliot," [204]). We frequently find Henry reading and reciting, Zen-like, from the fictional shortstop's manual *The Art of Fielding*, from which the novel takes its name—his dedication to his craft is a literary one. The literary world of the novel is one of chance discoveries and beating the odds. A current just as strong as baseball in the novel is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick:* Melville's statue stands at the center of campus, commemorating a long-ago campus visit; the college teams are named the Harpooners, in Melville's honor; the university President is a Melville scholar, and refers to his prized first edition of *Moby Dick* as simply, The Book. What better proof of the delayed temporality of literary prestige, of holding out for slim chances, than *Moby Dick*, the book that Melville couldn't give away and that now receives pride of place on every American literature syllabus? Henry's chances of athletic success, he knows, are slim: this drives him back to the field to train to exhaustion.

It's not hard to read something of Ahab's obsession in Henry and Mike's respective intensities. That these first few pages of *Fielding* are the same that first enraptured

Harbach's then prospective agent collapses the distance between the literary and athletic fields. The resonances between college-aged Harbach and his fictional Skrimshander are clear: soft-spoken Midwestern boys from blue-collar families who feel out of place at their fancy universities, dedicated body and soul to their respective crafts, and trying desperately to make it in a competitive industry. Harbach, who spent 10 years writing *The Art of Fielding,* certainly understands Henry's striving firsthand. But it's the story of Mike Schwartz, with whom Parris-Lamb identified so closely, that most clearly crystallizes agency in contemporary fiction, and through Henry and Mike's complicated relationship that we might read *Fielding* as allegorically refracting the processes of literary production.

Upon his rapturous discovery, Mike Schwartz's behavior begins to resemble that of an agent: Schwartz has a plan for Henry, the Harpooners, and himself. These plans involve a great deal of personal investment with little chance of success, but Schwartz forges ahead, committed that his vision should come to fruition. Schwartz handles all of the arrangements for Henry's admission to Westish mere weeks before the semester begins, even securing him a handsome athletic scholarship. He convinces Henry's parents, who are understandably concerned about Mike's motivations once they discover that he is not a coach. "I'm sure Mike Schwartz gets his cut; a thousand bucks a sucker," Henry's father speculates. But, after Mike drives to town and pitches his plan over lunch—*lunch!*—Mr. Skrimshander is sold. "Henry's dad, who so rarely strung four words together, especially on a Monday night, went on to talk… about sacrifice, passion, desire, attention to detail, the need to strive like a champion every day. He was talking just like Mike Schwartz, but he seemed not quite to realize it" (14).

Schwartz's talent, both as a ball player and as our stand-in for the agent, is his ability to survey the field as a whole; as team captain, Schwartz maintains a thorough knowledge of each of his teammates, the Athletic Department, and their competitors, reflecting the agent's finely cultivated "structural perspective." Schwartz's position on the team—catcher—suits these perspectival tendencies. From his crouch behind home plate, Schwartz exhibits an uncanny ability to perceive each player's aspirations and limitations, and he uses all of this information to the Harpooners' advantage—calling pitches, taunting batters, challenging umpires. More than an ability to perceive situations, Schwartz exhibits a prescience that is not dissimilar from Henry's: while Henry seems able to anticipate a ball's every move, Schwartz is able to intuit how each action will trigger another, on and off the field. When Henry is made to play second-string to a less-skilled player, Schwartz goads the starting shortstop into a locker room brawl, resulting in their mutual rejection from the game—and Henry's position in the starting lineup. "I think it was what he wanted," one of the other players speculates. "He orchestrated the whole episode to get you in the game" (45). Schwartz takes punches so Henry needn't, leaving Henry to wonder at Schwartz's ability to calculate and predict the outcome of situations: "How did he know?... he'd thought of a plan, something to try, and he'd been bold enough to try it" (466). Schwartz's confidence in his own vision compels him to take ever-greater risks—and, more often than not, they pay off.

Like any good agent, the primary way that Schwartz creates stability in a high-risk field is by helping Henry to hone his natural talent and ability, shaping him into a desirable MLB draft pick. Schwartz understands that Henry's talent needs to be channeled toward achieving his goal; he needs to be trained—"fixed"—in order to appeal to professional

scouts. Under Schwartz's tutelage, Henry lifts weights, runs stadiums, and chugs SuperBoost in hopes of bulking up. "When Henry could run up and down all the stairs in the football stadium without stopping, Schwartz bought him a weighted vest. When he could run five seven-minute miles, Schwartz made him do it on the sand…Medicine balls, blocking sleds, yoga, bicycles, ropes, tree branches, steel trash cans, plyometrics—no implements or ideas were too mundane or exotic" (47). Schwartz's strategy is one of insight and anticipation. "All you had to do was look at each of your players and ask yourself: What story does this guy wish someone would tell him about himself? And then you told the guy that story. You told it with a hint of doom. You included his flaws. You emphasized the obstacles that could prevent him from succeeding. That was what made the story epic: the player, the hero, had to suffer mightily *en route* to his final triumph" (149). Schwartz's coaching philosophy is a sort of fantasy of a super-agent, whose perspective of the entirety of the literary field is transformed into a sort of heroic omniscience. The key presumption is that their hard work will pay off. They suffer mightily, but in their training, they pursue a shared story of epic success.

Henry follows Mike's instructions to the letter, and by his junior year, "he'd become something Westish College had never seen: a *prospect*." Schwartz helps to generate buzz around Henry, such that at each game "scouts were loitering in their Ray-Bans behind the backstop," and local fans, "who'd heard about the must-see kid with the magic glove," turn up just to watch Henry practice (49). Henry finds himself aggressively pursued by scouts, and is stunned to learn that he may be a first-round draft pick. Henry considers the relative merits of profits and prestige, weighing his potential financial windfall, on the one hand, and his long-time love of the game, on the other. Should he hold out for a larger signing

bonus, or should he sign early with the St. Louis Cardinals, home of his hero Aparicio Rodriguez? All the while, Henry is reminded of his slim odds by the scouts in the bleachers, all washed-up minor leaguers whose dreams of greatness amounted to road-trips to middle-of-nowhere college towns in economy-grade rental cars, and a diet of fast food. With each conversation about his potential signing bonus, Henry confronts the forking paths of his future: a successful player, or a has-been.

Meanwhile, Schwartz tries to shield Henry from the pressures that might distract him. It doesn't work: Henry cannot escape the nagging feeling that he simply cannot cut it; no matter how hard he has trained, he is simply too small to meet the standards for a professional ball player. "Teams wanted monsters in their middle infields, guys who could blast home runs; the days when you could thrive as a pure defensive genius, an Omar Vizquel or Aparicio Rodriguez, were over. He had to be a genius *and* a monster" (96). While Henry's physical limitations serve to heighten the impressiveness of his defensive abilities, and make the potential of his success (and the keenness of Mike's vision) all the sweeter, the odds are not in his favor, and he knows it. So he continues to follow Schwartz's instructions to the letter to keep his doubts at bay. "Henry knew better than to want freedom. The only life worth living was the unfree life, the life Schwartz had taught him." (346). As the source of Henry's success, Schwartz has ensured his own centrality in Henry's career: Henry's doubts lead him to depend on Schwartz all the more, for he has no other choice. Henry has Schwartz to thank for his every success, and so Schwartz has become the ultimate confidante and counselor. "Without Schwartz, come to think of it," Henry muses, "there was hardly even any Henry Skrimshander" (100). Indeed, as Henry's veneer of perfection falters, the stakes of such a close working relationship become clearer. On the

day that Henry is set to break the NCAA record, he cracks. An errant throw to first sails past the first baseman and into the dugout, where it collides with a teammate's face. Henry spirals into paralyzing self-doubt and his record decays; in its somewhat cliché and didactic manner, *Fielding* demonstrates the dangers of valuing success over craft. Henry's mind has been too occupied with his chances to go pro that he has lost sight of his love of the game; his training has been too focused on "becoming a monster" that he has compromised his natural abilities; his sense of self-worth has become too dependent on becoming the hero in Schwartz's story. *Fielding* offers us a cautionary tale of the sorts of corporate creativity that agents enact, presenting early and intense professionalization in direct opposition to natural abilities and dedication to a craft.

Mike Schwartz clearly doesn't share this perspective: he vows to restore Henry to his previous state. "He would do whatever he could to get Henry straightened out… If that meant spending the next two months thinking of nothing but Henry and how to help him, so be it… His life could wait" (203). If Henry fails, Schwartz amounts to nothing. The symbiosis of talent management is clear: as one participant told me, good writing is "necessary but not sufficient," for a book to be great; *Fielding* shows us that the opposite also holds true: good representation is necessary but not sufficient for either short or long-term success.[51] Neither agent nor author can fully succeed without the talents and skills of

[51] J.D. Connor makes a similar observation about film agents in his *The Studios After the Studios*: "In such a situation, agents can shoulder blame for the assembly of talent but can never take credit for the success of the project since the proximate cause of the film's success lies in the work of the writers, directors, actors, editors, and so on. Since aesthetic credit is unavailable to agencies, they have an incentive to define success as control over the antecedent and largely economic elements of a film, not the consequent, more aesthetic result" (Connor 126). I would argue, however, that aesthetic credit *is* available to literary agents, particularly given the oversight that they exhibit in preparing a book for market. In Connor's account of literary agents in the 1980s, post-Studio system of Hollywood, there is

the other. For as much as Henry believes that he is nothing without Schwartz, Schwartz believes that he can be nothing without Henry. Schwartz "had no art to call his own. He knew how to motivate people, manipulate people, move them around; this was his only skill…Working with Henry was the closest he'd ever come, because Henry knew only one thing, wanted only one thing, and his single-mindedness made him—made both of them—pure" (408). Unbeknownst to Henry, Schwartz commandeered the footage from their game in Peoria; the tape was the *piece de resistance* in Mike Schwartz's execution of his plan for Henry's athletic career, the evidence of his singular vision. The tape, along with Schwartz's powers of persuasion, served as Henry's admission material, "proof to other people, and especially to himself, that he hadn't exaggerated Henry's talent or hallucinated him altogether" (258). That Schwartzy initially saw what the other fans, Henry's teammates, and even Henry's parents ignored remains a lasting point of pride, and he rewatches it often. "Schwartz couldn't quite say why he'd kept [the tape] to himself for the past three years—as if there were a part of Henry that belonged more to him than it did to Henry. That he didn't want to share, not even with Henry" (258). To borrow Parris-Lamb's terms: Henry was giving Schwartz a chance to be the best. Henry's breakdown also threatened to take that chance away.

Fielding highlights the key struggle for the agent in the literary field: ultimately, their success is out of their hands—a gamble—dependent on time, talent, and an unpredictable marketplace. No matter how expert the representation, it is insufficient to

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a sharp distinction between representation and artistic production that is inconsistent with the literary agent's expected interaction with a book, as this chapter has shown. Literary agents are thus much more closely associated with the aesthetic outcome of a text, and define their own prestige according to their proximity to literary greatness in a way that is appears, in many ways, analogous to the author (or, in Connor's system, the actor).

produce a masterpiece. No matter how fine the talent, it is insufficient without appropriate management. No amount of structural or field-level insight can ensure a book's sales, let alone its canonization. Belief and training may provide some stable structure to an unpredictable system, and an agent may work like hell to see that a book receives the recognition that it deserves, but that work may lead to nothing. *The Art of Fielding*, in the end, enacts that final reckoning in which both agent and author take a shot at becoming the best. The novel closes much as it opens: Schwartz and Henry on the field, hitting grounders. Their aspirations remain, as yet, unrealized; as with any great work of literature, their respective greatness will only be conferred in time. They can only play the game.

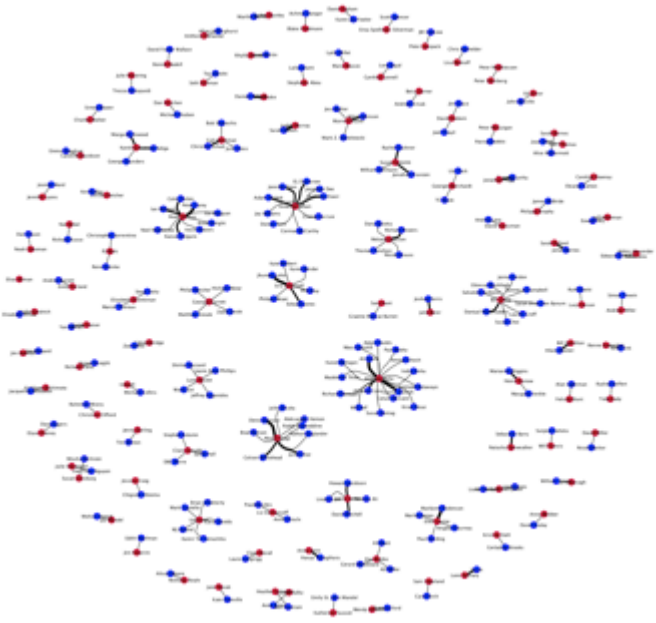
V. Reading the Field

What might it mean for literary studies to return some agency to the agent? How might literary scholars take the agent's agency more seriously as a force shaping contemporary fiction? What networks of reading might open up, what familial resemblances explored, if the literary agent were the recipient of sustained attention in studies of contemporary literature and literary production? Through my ethnography and analysis of literary agents, I have demonstrated the channels through which multimedia conglomerates exercise aesthetic influence. I want to conclude by proposing yet another way we might consider the agent's role as gatekeeper in contemporary literature, proposing a model of reading that is commensurate with the process of literary production, centering the networks on which the literary backend relies.

Beyond *The Art of Fielding*, Chris Parris-Lamb has been an enormously successful agent. In fact, his most successful sale was the 2015 900-pager *City on Fire* by Garth Risk-Hallberg. *City on Fire* drew a purported 2-million-dollar advance at auction. But before the

sale, Parris-Lamb sold the film rights to producer Scott Rudin, in a rare reversal of the order of things (earning him a *Wall Street Journal* profile). In a *Guernica* interview, Parris-Lamb discussed the similarities between the two books on a surface level. He loves long books, for instance: "*Infinite Jest*, *Ulysses*, *Middlemarch*. These are my favorite books. I just like long books, I guess. There aren't many of them out there and it says something about somebody, in terms of ambition, that they're prepared to try and write that kind of novel."[52] While this comparison is rather banal, and while perhaps the comparison between *Fielding* and *City on Fire* stops at length, as a thought experiment, centering a particular agent's taste as the basis of analysis is provocative. What would emerge if we read *Fielding* and *City on Fire* in concert?[53] I offer, in conclusion, a view of the literary field centered on the agent.

Figure 2: Agents and the prizewinning or shortlisted authors that they represent. Blue nodes are authors who have won or been shortlisted for the Man Booker, the National Book Award, or the Pulitzer Prize since 2000. Red, central nodes are their agents.



[52] https://www.guernicamag.com/the-art-of-agenting/

[53] The first, immediately obvious comparison is the structural arrangement of the novels: each features an ensemble of characters, changing points of view each chapter.

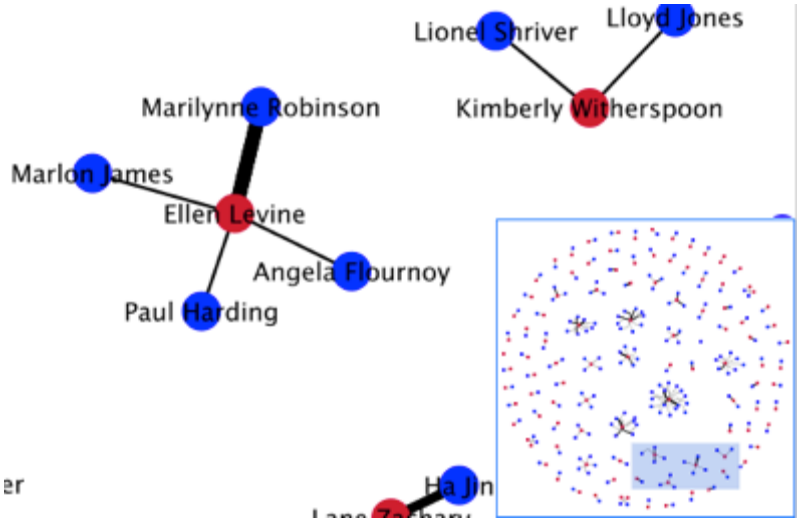
This network graph (fig. 2) shows the connections between all of the authors shortlisted for the Man Booker, the National Book Awards, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction since 2000, and their respective agents.[54] The central red nodes represent agents, and the attached blue nodes, authors. The more awards that an author has won or for which she has been shortlisted, the thicker the edge that connects author and agent (no author in the dataset has been nominated more than three times).[55] The field is less densely populated than I initially hypothesized, as the majority of interactions are closed pairs—one agent, representing one prize-winning author. But there are very few agents who represent more than one prize-winning author; even though these agents have not entirely crowded out the field (it seems that it is still possible for a book to be nominated or even win an award without one of these central agents), the central nodes are much more successful and influential than the outside nodes.

Several clusters have formed around some of the more influential agents—Andrew Wylie, Eric Simonoff, Peter Strauss, Bill Clegg—but it is less the density of particular clusters than the surprising connections that interest me. On the surface, books like Marilynne Robinson's *Home* and Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings* bear very little formal or topical similarity. Yet, they are united by virtue of their mutual representation by Ellen Levine; each book is, in its own way, in tune with Levine's literary taste and sensibility (see fig. 3). Placing these texts in conversation with one another may not do much for our understanding of either Robinson or James, but it might throw into

[54] This graph was made using the open-source platform Cytoscape and the plugin Allegro Layout. Raw data is available in a GitHub repository at http://github.com/lbmcgrath.
[55] An interactive version of this graph is available at https://goo.gl/zw9RGN

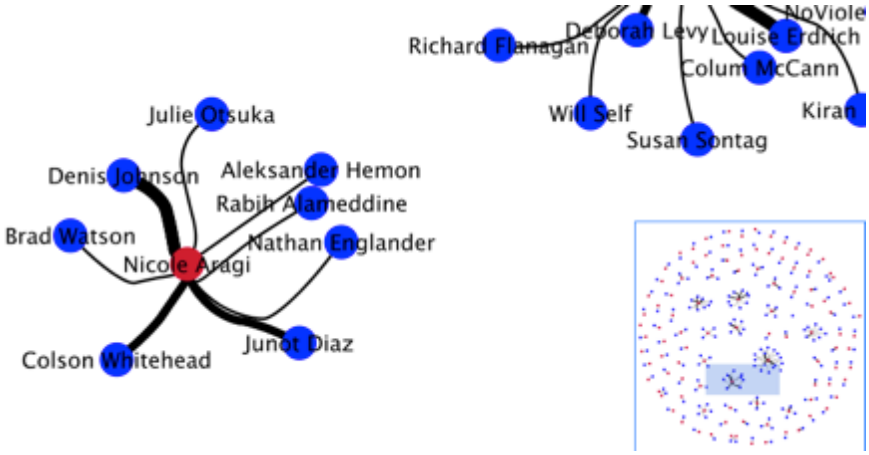
high relief the mechanics of at least *one* of the dominant tastes in the literary marketplace, beginning to clarify that which is often dismissed as unquantifiable and elusive.

Figure 3: Ellen Levine and the prizewinning/shortlisted authors she represents—Marilynne Robinson, Marlon James, Paul Harding, and Angela Flournoy.



While James and Robinson are disparate writers, the case of Nicole Aragi reveals the ways in which an agent might be drawn to similar books and exercise her taste for fiction with a great deal of influence. While Levine's taste appears to be eclectic and might give us very little purchase on trends in the literary marketplace over the last 20 years, Aragi's taste appears much more specific, as her nominated clients attest (see fig. 4): Colson Whitehead, Junot Diaz, Julie Otsuka, and Aleksander Hemon have some surface level similarities, all writing about issues of race and ethnicity in the United States. Jonathan Safran Foer, another of Aragi's clients, joins this group in their shared interest in manipulating literary form; this particular type of author seems to have gravitated toward Aragi, and her management has led to their great success and her great influence.

Figure 4: Nicole Aragi, her authors, and her very particular tastes.

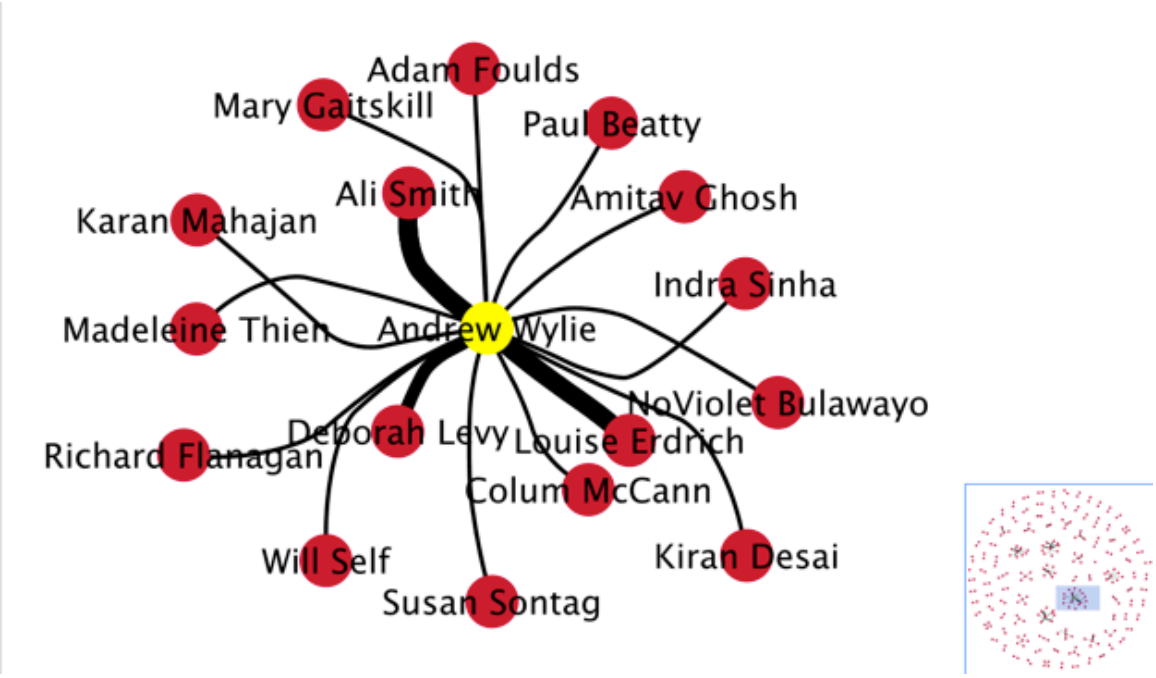


As a map of at least one small segment of the contemporary literary marketplace reveals that the authors who are often referred to as "New York authors" or "ethnic authors" or "celebrity authors" (in the case of Diaz and Foer) might also be called "Aragi authors." The family resemblance between this group is striking: Nicole Aragi, it would seem, is responsible for the development and promotion of many of the more prominent authors of color, who write explicitly about issues of race and ethnicity in the United States. One can easily imagine a study that considers these authors in conversation, whether a traditional literary study or a data-driven corpus analysis, to consider the interventions that Aragi's taste is making in conversations about and critiques of the blinding whiteness of contemporary American literature and literary production. Might Aragi be responsible for the development of a new American ethnic literature, a poetics of race in the contemporary?

The questions continue. The largest cluster, perhaps unsurprisingly, is Andrew Wylie. While Wylie is known for poaching high-profile clients and this network analysis does not account for time (i.e., does not indicate whether Wylie represented the particular book that garnered the award and/or nomination for his client), we can see what has

alternatively been called global literature or world literature centralized around Wylie, though his role in the development and promotion of a sort of contemporary cosmopolitan literature has not been remarked upon. James English has written at length about the

Figure 5: Andrew Wylie and his authors.



role of global literature in the "economy of prestige," and the self-serving tendency (particularly in the United Kingdom, with the Man Booker) to recognize global literature with major international prizes. Considering the role of prominent tastemakers in this economy of prestige, particularly in the case of someone as prominent as Wylie, would enrich our considerations of global literary economies and institutions. Alternatively, comparing the tastes and influence of Aragi and Wylie might illuminate the ways that national and international literary economies develop around particular figures: Aragi's authors are particularly concerned with American ethnic identity, whereas Wylie's authors—including the Americans among them—represent a sort of postcolonial

cosmopolitanism in their influence. Is there something particularly *American* about Nicole Aragi's taste, something particularly *British* about Wylie's? These two figures represent crucial nodes in the development of national literatures in the contemporary, crystallizing particular tastes and promoting authors with very particular aesthetics.

To acknowledge the agent's influence in this regard might be akin to recognizing the influence of a figure such as Max Perkins in the development of literary modernism: a central figure around which authors of shared sensibilities gravitated, who developed more than single authors, but rather a literary movement. Today, editors like Perkins are rare; the industry does not allow for such intentional editorial oversight any longer. But agents have stepped into that void, inheriting much of the work that once fell to editors without the acknowledgment of their creative work and influence. Prominent cultural producers, gatekeepers, and tastemakers, agents play a crucial role in contemporary literary production. As agents continue to administrate the logic of a changing corporate culture and literary marketplace, it is likely that their influence will continue to grow—and their creativity become more pronounced. Of course, it's too early to tell: this is a risky business, after all. But it is crucial that scholars of literary institutions be attentive to this influence to fully account for the workings of the literary marketplace, and the forms and fictions of literature in the contemporary.

CHAPTER TWO:

Editors

I. Selling *10:04*

No one was more surprised by Ben Lerner's meteoric rise than Ben Lerner. His second novel, *10:04*, was not only published to widespread critical fanfare, but fetched a sizable advance before it was even written. "[My] agent had e-mailed me that she believed I could get a 'strong six-figure' advance based on a story of mine that had appeared in *The New Yorker*; all I had to do was promise to turn it into a novel" (4). This is a familiar story, the same process that launched Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person" to fame. Lerner's story becomes chapter 2 of *10:04*, a novel that has very little to do with the "earnest if indefinite" proposal Lerner submitted for auction and everything to do with the act of writing an unwritten, already commodified novel. While Lerner was confused by his 'six-figure advance,' his agent was not.

> I asked my agent to explain to me once more why anybody would pay such a sum for a book of mine, especially an unwritten one, given that my previous novel, despite an alarming level of critical acclaim, had only sold around ten thousand copies. Since my first book was published by a small press, my agent said, the larger houses were optimistic that their superior distribution and promotion could help a second book do much better than the first. Moreover, she said, publishers pay for prestige. Even if I wrote a book that didn't sell, these presses wanted a potential darling of the critics or someone who might win prizes; it was symbolic capital that helped maintain the reputation of the house even if most of their money was being made by teen vampire sagas or one of the handful of mainstream "literary novelists" who actually sold a ton of books. (154).

This is, of course, the story of *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) and its afterlife. Lerner's debut novel was the first book from Minneapolis-based Coffee House Press to garner a review in *The New Yorker;* the novel was named on a number of year-end best-of lists, and won the Believer Book Award. Anna Stein, Ben Lerner's enterprising agent, entered into negotiations for his second novel armed with this information. She parlayed each of these data points—the award, the reviews, the *New Yorker* story– into a competitive pitch. And on the other side of the negotiating table, "the larger houses" considered relevant data of their own—distribution, promotion, symbolic capital. The result: a 'strong six figure' deal for an unwritten novel. Lerner's second book would be published with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, the most prestigious literary imprint within the Macmillan conglomerate. More than a novel about itself, *10:04* is a remarkable artifact of corporate publishing, one that constantly gestures towards the unseen, large-scale networks of data that produced it.

In this chapter, I consider the professional shift in the role of the editor from gatekeepers to data miners. Over the course of 4 months, I interviewed 8 literary editors in the Big Five. I began each of my interviews by posing a deceptively simple question: "How do you decide to buy a book?" I anticipated that these editors and I would have rambling conversations about the nature of literary taste, about the books we enjoyed, about the future of the novel. That they would fill in Lerner and Stein's story with an equally metacritical and self-disclosing tale of imprint in fighting, competition, and persuasion. I was wrong. In response to my question, editors told me about the data that they generate and analyze: "comps."

Comps are "comparative titles"—previously published books that are similar to the title under consideration for acquisition, that are used as a proxy when generating projected sales figures to determine if a potential acquisition is financially viable. The logic of comps is straightforward: *Book A is similar to Book B. Because Book A sold so many copies and made so much money, we can assume that Book B will also sell so many copies and make so much money.* Comps are used to estimate the author advance, the basis for making a competitive bid, and, by extension, are often the deciding factor for acquiring a title. Decried by agents (as we saw in Chapter 1), comps are more favorably viewed by editors; perhaps unsurprisingly, editors hold a more nuanced and even sympathetic approach to the acts of literary comparison and valuation that agents previously claimed are limiting their opportunity to publish innovative work and squelching innovation in conglomerates. Though contentions, comps represent a significant metric of literary influence in contemporary publishing.

In what follows, I discuss the development of comps as the product of an aesthetic judgment, dependent equally on style as profit margins. Relying on my interviews with editors, I situate comps within the larger institutional logic of profit and loss that dominates corporate publishing, considering both the role of the editor as middleman and the development of comp titles as a key editorial data point. Second, I analyze large-scale trends in comparative title data, relying on data extracted from publishers' 2016 quarterly catalogs. By placing this data in dialogue with editors' comments on the acquisitional process, my goal is not to "fact check" my editors with data, or to undermine the validity of qualitative research, but rather to get a fuller picture of the literary field, embedding these individual experiences within a complex industry.

Importantly, *10:04* also shows us how the data *around* texts often become the data *within* texts. That is, Lerner makes these recursive, data-driven systems the topic of his novel—not only the backdrop, but also the very foundation. Comp title data does more than impact literary acquisition and circulation; comp titles also shape literary style. I conclude with a reading of the most influential comp title of 2016—Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*—considering the novel's allegorical reflection on the complicated relationship between art and commerce. I seek to demonstrate the efficacy of a hybrid model of reading, one that considers the ever-expending sociological data *around* texts, mixing quantitative and qualitative methods while pivoting between traditional literary readings and data analysis.

II. Editors and the Logic of Profit-and-Loss

Participants

In the introduction to his new edited collection, *What Editors Do*, Peter Ginna, himself a longtime editor, outlines three phases of editing: acquisitions, development, and publication. In the public imagination, editors tend to be associated with Phase 2, Development, thanks to the famed work of Max Perkins, fictional depictions like Michael Chabon's Terry Crabtree, and occasional high-profile sallies in the pages of *The New York Review of Books,* such as Gerry Howard's recent defense of Hanya Yanagihara.[56] In reality, editors in the Big Five spend the majority of their time on acquiring new titles— "finding new works to publish," as well as "screening submissions from authors and literary agents," and "scouting for promising new writers" (6). As the mention of "scouting" in this job

[56] Howard, Gerald. "Too Hard… To Take." *New York Review of Books*. 17 December 2015.

description perhaps suggests, an editor who spends most of her time acquiring is likely in the earlier stages of her career, without a full slate of high-producing authors comprising a backlist. With this in mind, I set out to interview junior editors about their procedures and preferences when acquiring new titles.

I began my interviews with editors having developed only a loose protocol, and beginning interviews with one simple question. "How do you decide to acquire a book?" I asked. With a follow-up: "I'm interested in both your personal taste in the decision, as well as the protocol for acquiring in your imprint." I interviewed 8 junior editors. Participants shared a number of similarities by virtue of their immediate professional proximity. I employed a snowball sampling method, asking each of my participants to supply me with contact information for their friends (and competitors). While many of my participants are co-workers, I recruited a group of participants from across imprints. Given my sampling method, the makeup of participants proves to be an interesting finding in itself: literary editors are a collegial group, and their professional relationships do not appear to be restricted to the boundaries of their imprint (though, as in any industry, professional and personal rivalries are to be expected). Four of the Big Five conglomerates are represented in my sample, giving me great confidence in the representativeness of my findings.

As I began these interviews, I had some presumptions about what I'd find. I presumed that editors, having chosen the more traditional "literary" profession than agents or salespeople, would have clearly defined their own tastes in and for contemporary literature, and that their personal tastes would drive their acquisitions. I presumed that editors would be incredibly reflective about the corporate practices of their houses. I presumed that "literariness" and "profit" would be at loggerheads, and this conflict would

be a source of personal and professional tension for participants. Almost none of these assumptions proved to be correct. Indeed, through my interviews, it became clear that the Big Five establish very clear professional parameters, a strong sense of both corporate identity and the identity of individual imprints. What appeared to be a conflict to me, an outsider, was in fact worked through as an editor was assimilated into an imprint and acclimated to the modus operandi at any given imprint.

Editors as Investors

As we have seen, the corporate imperatives of conglomeration have changed the practice of making literature through the imposition of fundamentally mismatched expectations of books as products. Multimedia conglomerates have imposed acontextual and ahistorical bottom lines on book divisions, demanding profit margins consistent with that of other media divisions (video games, say). Given this shifting business model, editors increasingly face pressure to buy books that will deliver—and to direct their marketing teams to ensure that their bets pay off. In this context, publishers are increasingly searching for mechanisms and metrics by which they can quantify—and, thereby, predict—success in the marketplace. High-profile attempts by the Big Five to crack the bestseller code or determine the likelihood of "virality" have targeted the upper-echelons of book-based income, but importantly, the impact of quantification is felt at every level of the corporate publishing house. From the moment a book enters a publishing house, it is being measured, evaluated, assigned a dollar amount that corresponds to its print run and likelihood for adaptations. Each editor, however junior, is indoctrinated into the logic of profits-and-loss, predicting literary value and adjusting their actions accordingly. More

than simply determining a title's profitability, the logic of profit-and-loss is imbued into every level of the multimedia conglomerate, and is central in the editor's articulation of their occupational status.

To put it crudely, agents sell and editors buy. Agents make pitches, and editors compete with one another at auction for the rights to produce, publish, and profit from a title. Yet, rather than framing their work in the language of "buying," my participants relied on the language of *investing*. Participants all expressed a keen awareness that, like investment bankers, their work is to invest their employers' money in products that will yield a high return on investment (ROI). The real skill of editing, my participants told me, is knowing how, and in whose career, their employer's funds should be invested. The language of investment highlights an important principle for acquisitions: there is a limited sum of money to be invested. Editors must compete with their colleagues on behalf of a title or an author—and, depending on the editor's personality or the culture at the imprint—acquisitions are often treated as a zero-sum game. In order to be competitive, editors must persuade their colleagues and superiors, drawing on a book's financial and symbolic capital. While the relative ROI may be a straightforward calculation (cost of printing and circulation, subtracted from total projected revenue), symbolic capital and prestige are both more challenging to measure and more influential in the acquisition.

For instance, at the base of any acquisition is a sense of alignment between author and editor; even these interpersonal connections and affections are quantified. Editors told me that, early the acquisition process, they try to give authors "a sense of what it's like to work with you and maybe make them *fall in love* with you" (emphasis mine). Beyond simply being "on the same page editorially," editors often try to cultivate a meaningful

affective connection as a means of competing with other editors for a prospective author's affection. One of the more prestigious honors for an editor is to secure a book as the "under-bidder," as in the case of Chad Harbach and his editor, Michael Pietsch that we considered in chapter 1. Winning as the under-bidder means that the connection between editor and author carries more weight than the size of the advance. "You're very proud of yourself if you've won as the under-bidder," one participant told me. "It means that, even if you didn't have the much money, you've captivated [the author] the most, you've excited them the most. They wanted to work with you and they were willing to take less money." While interpersonal relationships still play a decisive factor in acquisition, even these relationships are leveraged for their financial yield. Emotions—captivation, excitement, love—become variables in an equation, with a financial value that can be calculated. My participants were clear: each and every component of book production—from the relationship between author and editor to the allotted printing budget—is evaluated for its relative (dis)advantages.

Because editors see their work as an investment, rather than a straightforward transaction, they think of themselves as being "in the business of careers." Investing in an author early in his career, whether by offering a large advance or securing a two-book deal, ensures that the publisher will continue to generate an income. While participants acknowledged that an investment takes time to mature in order to be profitable, their profit-driven acquisitions decisions reflect the difficulty of the market. "It's related to how much time and energy it takes for us to try to break out of a novel. We want to see that investment in our author. They obviously wrote a book, so they're invested, but […] we want to see somebody who's nurturing their own career in a way that makes us feel like we

should invest in it, too." (We will return to the evidence of an author "nurturing" his own career in Chapter 3.) Whether winning as the under-bidder or nurturing an author's craft over time, editors are well aware that money alone does not sustain a career and is no assurance of a mature, profitable investment. Yet, these affective priorities are weighted nonetheless, considered for their respective contribution to net profitability over time.

Editors as Experts

My participants, former English majors all, also discuss their work in highly academic terms; their career success is often dependent on the development of expertise about a certain segment of the field. It is worth noting that, by and large, editors acquire within specific genres; whether in fiction or nonfiction (rarely both), they further develop a reputation for the types of genres they prefer. The effect of this specialization is that editors develop a pronounced expertise; they closely monitor the segment of the market in which their books circulate, becoming highly discerning readers of their particular area of expertise. As such, an editor's assessment of a book's likely market share or potential readership is highly regarded. Editors become students of their acquisition area, and describe Acquisition Board meetings as "like an MFA seminar," complete with circled-desks. They discussed reading their colleagues' new titles as "homework." Likewise, one participant described her promotion to a prestigious literary imprint, saying, "I'm going to Yale!" I offer these anecdotes to underscore the ways that, no matter how profit-driven the decision may appear, these editors see their work in highly academic terms. Their decisions to pursue an investment are based in a carefully cultivated expertise; they are students of a literary form as well as students of the market. And in every acquisition, the

editors' credibility is at stake. While literary agents stake much of their personal reputation on the quality of the deal that they are able to strike on behalf of their clients, editors distinguish themselves based on the quality and the profitability of the books that they acquire.

Editors must also master a particular genre of writing called the called the Profit and Loss Statement, or P&L. A uniquely industrial genre, P&Ls are generated for every title being considered for acquisition, in every imprint (though the form differs slightly). These internally-circulated documents are highly formulaic, divided into two main sections: an editor's written evaluation, and predictive calculations based on comp titles, projecting a book's potential sales. Each begins with the editor's one-line pitch: "A debut novel set in the French countryside exploring the themes of infidelity and betrayal in ordinary life," and "A coming-of-age memoir of a gender nonconforming person and an exploration of… whatever it is," to borrow two examples from a participant. Flexing his critical muscles, the editor continues to detail his impressions of the book's strengths, the audience he envisions for the book, its fit within the house, and the major changes that he will request from the author. The second half of the P&L is comprised of calculations about a book's likely net and gross profitability.[57] Comp titles provide the basis of these projections, including the

[57] Editors estimate both gross and net profit based on the number of units that will sell in each edition (including hardcover, paperback, ebook, downloadable audio) during the first year of publication; the P&L then automatically deducts the costs of producing a title, including (but not limited to): a "unit bound cost" estimating the cost of printing; marketing costs ($x/copy); time and labor for editors and book designers; and, finally overhead: "the rent on our offices." There is a formula for establishing the hardcover to paperback ratio, but this is largely dependent on audience and tends to differ based on the imprint. Notably, not all books warrant every type of edition. Coffee table books or art books may not warrant a paperback; likewise, only books that have been written by a major celebrity will warrant an audio CD in addition to a downloadable audio. One participant estimated that overhead costs per book can exceed $90k, creating a high barrier to profitability for smaller

estimate for author earnings (royalties). The author earnings number is especially significant: "That's the number that we use to roughly get the sense of what kind of author advance we might want to pay." A persuasive P&L, then, relies on both an editor's aesthetic judgment and bankable profits.

Comps are the backbone of the P&L. Comps,[58] "comparable" or "comparative titles," are selected to assure the accuracy of these estimates and, consequently, the validity of the decisions these data support. But comps do much more than simply determine the size of the author advance or the size of the print run. Comps must be based on *stylistically accurate* comparisons, such that every budgetary estimate, every number generated, is also an argument about literary taste. Dependent on both style and profit, comps represent the most significant metric of literary value and influence in contemporary publishing, a key arbiter of corporate taste.

III. Comp Titles

It would hard to overstate the centrality of comps in the Big Five. As one participant told me, "Comps are *king* in this business. It's ridiculous, and it's also useful." Comp titles are not optional; they are industry standard. Every publisher in the Big Five, every mid-sized publisher, and every indie press relies on comps to varying degrees. While the logic behind comp titles may be straightforward—this book is like that book – comp title selection is actually quite complex, requiring an editor to exercise their expertise, creativity,

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titles. The pressure to pursue "big books," a practice that has been much-maligned, becomes clearer: big books keep the lights on.

[58] There is inconsistency amongst participants and industry literature if "comp" is short for "comparable" and "comparative." While several of my participants joked about their uncertainty ("You'd think I'd know this by now," etc.), they acknowledged that the meaning and function does not differ.

and industrial know-how. Though it is unclear when acquisition-by-comps became *modus operandi* in the Big Five, they are certainly a product of late-stage conglomeration. *Writer's Market* first mentions comp titles in 2012 (still in the era of the Big Six), though it's likely that identifying comps was common practice for a few years prior their inclusion in the annual digest. Since that time, comps have come to dominate every stage of the acquisition and book marketing process, from an agent's first pitch to generating data-driven P&Ls, from author platforming to a book marketing plan.

Like P&Ls, good comp titles rely on both subjective (if minimal) aesthetic judgment ("similar") with rough calculations ("50,000 copies"). These comparisons set expectations for the reading experience as well as for the book's likely performance, even while the act of selection confers prestige on editors for their critical reader's eye and their acquisitional canny. The result is a structure of quantitative data built on top of subjective comparison. While the comparisons being made are subjective, they are not arbitrary. Recognizing that a new acquisition is determined by the past performance, I posed a somewhat obvious question to participants: "If you really want to acquire a book, couldn't you just pick very profitable comp in order to persuade your boss?" They each responded with a resounding *no*. "You don't just pick a book, any book, that you think has sold about what you think [a new title] could sell," participants were quick to assert.

My participants responses suggest that the main criterion guiding the selection of comp titles is *accuracy*. Comps are useless if they are not accurate. "I think the most useful comp titles are the ones that feel accurate, and they're good books, but they're realistic. Because we all know not every book is going to sell hundreds of thousands of copies, so why would you pretend that they are?" Clearly, sales figures matter a great deal when

selecting accurate comp titles. My participants reported the necessity of a sort of "Goldilocks principle" when selecting comparably selling titles. On the one hand, a comp must have performed well if it is to persuade an editor in chief to acquire. Yet, comps cannot be overly optimistic. "You're looking for solidly selling titles that will get you a certain amount of money, but aren't going to create such unreasonable expectations that you're almost certainly going to fail." Another participant, who works at a different house, confirmed; while perhaps bestselling titles may be accurate in certain instances, the main principle governing selection is moderation: "In terms of sales in general, sometimes you're really swinging big for something and you're going to look at bestselling titles as your comps in-house… But in general, I'd say the rule is you can't go too high, and you can't go too low." Editors are well-aware of how difficult it is to sell a novel, and they select comps with this difficulty in mind. The process of finding a comp with persuasive-yet-credible sales is incredibly difficult.[59]

Editors stake their professional credibility on the accuracy of their comp titles. P&Ls are designed for the next reader in the acquisitional chain: agents select comps for editors; editors select comps for their Editor, for Acquisition Board, and (perhaps) again for the Sales and Marketing Team. Comps are not only designed to arrive at a target author advance, but to prime the reader for a certain type of reading experience.

> If a book doesn't actually feel like *Where'd You Go Bernadette*?, then telling us that it's the next *Where'd You Go Bernadette*?, or *Where'd You Go Bernadette*?-

[59] There are certainly other factors at play when considering the accuracy of sales figures, including the prospects of awards, the potential for selling media rights, or other unpredictable sociocultural phenomenon that may launch a book to the top of a bestseller list. (Participants pointed to the unlikely success of JD Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* in the wake of the 2016 election as an example of such unpredictable confluence of book and culture.)

> meets-blahdy-blah […] puts you going into the reading process of the submission in a very weird place, because it's like, I'm reading this and it feels nothing like *Where'd You Go Bernadette*?. Maybe [the submission is] really good, but it sets your expectations in a weird way.

By contrast, my participants were quick to accuse agents of identifying overly-ambitious comps in hopes of stacking the deck for their clients and securing a larger advance (and commission); this practice almost always backfires.

> "I can't tell you how many agents come in and they've got some pitch that's like *Wild* meets *The Glass Castle* and I'm just immediately like, no! I already know! If you're saying that, then I know that this isn't for me. Because how can I take you seriously if you're saying that?"

Indeed, the problem of over-hyping is a common enough problem that each of my participants spoke of it, identifying similar instances in which they received poorly executed pitches full of bad-faith comparisons. Just an agent may mismanage expectations by comping too high, an editor's ability to comp accurately demonstrates her clear grasp over both the artistic and commercial components of publishing, as well as bolstering her professional credibility. Given the importance of accuracy, comps function as much as a measure of the editor's skill as the acquisition's viability. Because comps must be accurate, they act as a test of an editor' knowledge of her field—an expression of expertise as much as taste. My participants all work at more literary imprints of Big Five houses (such as—but not necessarily—Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Random House, Little Brown, Knopf), and face a unique set of challenges when selecting comps for the more literary titles that cross their desks. I was told,

> "If you can't come up with any [comps] it's not a good sign ... you certainly aren't going to be able to offer tons and tons of money on a book if you can't come up with any comp titles. And it's absolutely going to be a huge factor in how much money you're allowed to offer, especially if it's a debut."

If comps provide the basis for a competitive bid, then editors must be especially strategic with their selections (while working within the confines of their imprint). While this may not be especially challenging for an editor in a high-producing genre-fiction imprint, literary editors must be especially dogged when comping for more unusual, literary books. One participant reported, "The more unusual a book is, the harder it's going to be to find those comp titles." In other words, acquiring literary titles requires a greater level of expertise and creativity, and is rewarded appropriately in prestige (if not profits).[60]

The difficulty that editors face when selecting comps for more literary titles highlights another key component of accuracy: for projected sales figures to be reliable, comps need to be an accurate reflection of a shared literary *style*. The stylistic similarity of titles—whether producing a similar reading experience, appealing to a similar audience, being concerned with similar issues, or experimenting with a similar form—is at the basis of a good-faith comparison, and what allows editors to feel a good deal of confidence in their sales projections. The more participants discussed "style," the more slippery the word became—at once a substitute for "genre," also "voice," occasionally "theme" or content," or even slipperier, the contract between author and audience. Despite their reliance on "style,"

[60] This is particularly important as editors, particularly at the more prestigious houses, are also evaluated according to their profitability. Their promotion from Assistant to Associate Editor, and on up the ladder, is dependent on how much ROI their particular acquisitions have generated. Two of my participants discussed an in-house "Profitability Statement" generated about their performance—an editor's own personal P&L—used when assessing annual performance and salary.

it is a term and concept without a stable definition—but, somehow, participants know it when they see it. These stylistic comparisons provide us insight into the type of book that an editor wants to acquire, the sorts of books that gain traction through acquisitions. In other words, "style," however loosely defined by participants, provides us insight into the nature of corporate taste in the Big Five.

When participants talked about style, they tended to say things like this:

> "You get into the type of author that somebody is, and the type of audience that they're reaching more than you do content. And that is very voice-driven. […]Especially in the highly literary space. There's a limited number of readers for a book like that, and you kind of know who they are and what books those people are responding to

This comment reveals how aesthetic and commercial investments are intertwined for editors. There is no "pure, literary space" distinct from capital in the Big Five. While this participant is interested in "voice," clearly an aesthetic concept, she quantifies voice in terms of the size of the audience—in other words, market share. For editors, any argument about literary style is *also* an argument about sales, and vice versa.

As an analytic measure, then, comps tell us just as much about what editors value—or what their employers value—as they do about contemporary literature. Given these norms, my key assumption is this: comp titles represent an *ideal* for editors, a sort of hypothetical literature whose effects publishers long to reproduce. Moreover, when we study trends in comp title data *at scale*, the values of the Big Five—and what I'm calling a *risk-proof style*—are thrown into high relief.

IV. The Data Around Texts

While literary scholars may rely on citation networks and syllabi as measurements of canonicity on the one hand, and prizes and bestseller lists as measurements of market value on the other, each of these measurements are dependent on a book's reception—its performance once it has been released into the marketplace. In other words, these are two measurements of readerly appreciation, whether by a community of scholars or by the "general reader." Comps are one of the only measurements available to us pre-publication, one of the few statements regarding what the *industry* deems worthwhile. They offer useful insight into the mechanics and preferences of the Big Five, revealing both the stylistic qualities considered profitable—or, more tellingly, worth pursuing anyway. Given the centrality of these convoluted (and often downright contradictory) metrics, my participants and I discussed comps at length. Through the comps that they select—not only what, but how, why, and for whom—we begin to see how the logic of profit and loss has come to dominate aesthetic judgment in the Big Five.

Because comp titles are especially useful for sales and marketing, they are printed in seasonal catalogs, reference points for sales reps, buyers for retail chains and independent bookstores, and book reviewers. Though not designed for public consumption, seasonal catalogs make for a rich and generative data source, providing insight into the use of comparable titles and making somewhat transparent the typically opaque workings of corporate publishing. To better understand the uses of comps, and the nature of corporate "risk-proof" style, I analyzed comp title data from each of the Big Five's 2016 seasonal catalogs. These preliminary findings are quite illuminating, revealing how different imprints work within the confines of multimedia conglomerates (using comps to activate

the age-old debate regarding commerce and culture), how individual imprints understand the marketplace, and how genre categories come into being. Because comps must be both "realistic and believable," and because editors opt for comps that are *more* realistic and believable than those identified by authors and agents, an analysis of the comps chosen by publishers should provide us with a fairly stable view of the marketplace from the position of the publishers, illuminating both corporate taste and corporate value.

Data Set

I collected 2,883 main titles from 2016 catalogs. I use "main titles" to refer to the books being sold. (See table 1.) Of these, I found 1,899 unique comp titles. For each main/comp title pair, I collected the following:

- Authors[61]
- Imprints
- Genre *as identified in catalogs*
- Comp title publication dates

On average, each main title was assigned 3 comps. (See figure 6.) I limited my data collection to fiction, though I made no further distinction between the types of genres I included or excluded. While I collected data from each of the Big Five's catalogs, Macmillan is underrepresented. Macmillan does not publish their comp titles in the same manner as

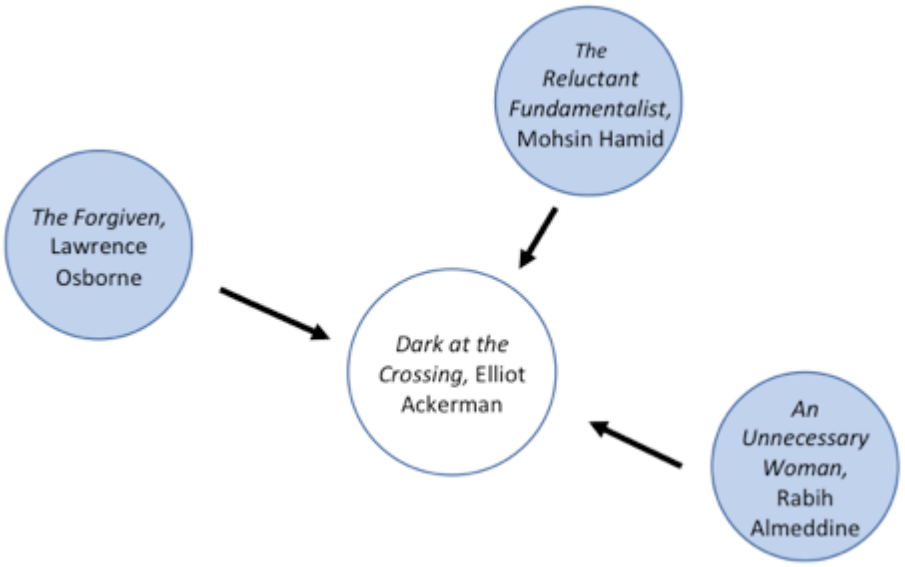
[61] Importantly, I eliminated a number of main titles from my data set, including those that were not assigned comps and in instances in which the main title and *all* comp titles were written by the same author. (This occurred primarily with "name brand" authors such as Steven King or James Patterson, or in very specific niche genres where comp titles by different authors may be lacking.) In instances where comps included a mix of the same author and different authors, I kept only those written by a different author.

Hachette, HarperCollins, Penguin Random House, or Simon & Schuster, though I am confident that they also rely on comp data when acquiring and marketing.[62]

Table 1: Data structure, excerpt.

Main Title	Main Title Author	Main Title Genre	Main Title Imprint	Comp Title	Comp Author	Comp Pub Date	Comp Genre	Pub	Season
Dark at the Crossing	Elliott Ackerman	Literary	Knopf	The Forgiven	Osborne, Lawrence	6/4/13	Fiction	PRH	Fall16
Dark at the Crossing	Elliott Ackerman	Literary	Knopf	An Unnecessary Woman	Alameddine, Rabih	2/4/14	Fiction	PRH	Fall16
Dark at the Crossing	Elliott Ackerman	Literary	Knopf	The Reluctant Fundamentalist	Hamid, Mohsin	4/3/07	Fiction	PRH	Fall16

Figure 6: Three comp titles to one main title.



[62] Macmillan provided only 14 comp titles in the entirety of their 2016 catalogs.

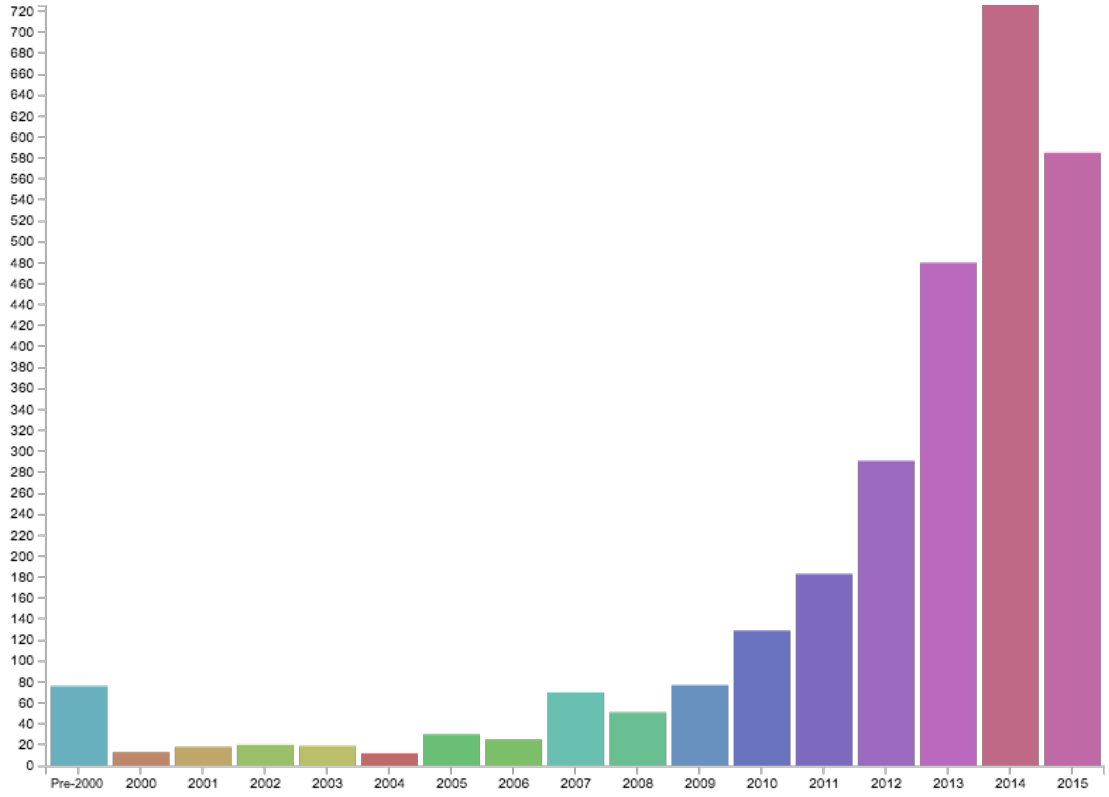
I want to hone in on *one simple argument* that has far reaching consequences: namely, that this system of data-driven acquisitions has had a *homogenizing* effect on contemporary literature.

Presentism and Innovation

Editors work within a number of confines when selecting accurate comp titles. Unsurprisingly, the most important metric that editors consider is the market. There is a very specific and narrow window for eligible comp titles. Editors tend to limit themselves to works that have been published *very recently*. Admittedly, there was some disagreement amongst my participants about how much recentness matters when comping: one participant indicated "At least one or two that have been published in the past two years," while another was looser with his estimates: "The books that you think of that have nice, healthy sales, you look at them and realize, 'Oh, that came out, like, 10 years ago.' So you can't go too far back." Generally, though, participants were in agreement that recentness is of great significance when selecting accurate comps. The reasons for this may be readily apparent, but one of my participants put it this way: "the book-buying *atmosphere* within three years is sort of similar. For instance, we can't use an eBook from 2006 cause that's when eBooks were selling really, really well. EBooks now don't do really well at all" (emphasis mine). Similarly, patterns for leisure purchases shifted after the economic crisis in 2008, and have slowly normalized; the media ecosystem has also re-arranged itself with the rise of audiobooks and even adult coloring books. This 3-5 year window for comp titles is meant to account for a range of socioeconomic factors and consumer behaviors. The inverse is also true: editors do not put much stock in comparisons to canonical literature.

"Utterly useless," one participant called canonical comparisons, for reasons that should be readily apparent. "Maybe it's thematically accurate, but it's not helpful at all. It doesn't mean anything to us. You can't compare a book to *The Great Gatsby*." By and large, these comments bear out in the data.

Figure 7: Comp title publication dates, by year (pre-2000-2015).



The quantitative data clearly attest to the significance of *recentness* for comp titles. I analyzed the publication dates of the 1,899 unique comp titles selected in 2016 (see figure 7) to understand how much emphasis editors place on the "three year window" when selecting comp titles. In 2016, 81% of comps selected had been published between 2012 and 2015. Notably, a mere 76 titles (2%) published prior to 2000 were selected as comp titles. 81% of all new titles somehow related to the books that *immediately* preceded them. Because sales and style are one and the same in the Big Five, these data tell us as much

about literary style as they do about the literary market. And what we see here—the contemporaneity of comp titles—suggests an ethic of presentism governing multimedia conglomerates—a *very* short-term institutional memory.

This ethic of presentism certainly has an impact on literary style. One can easily imagine the sort of flattening effect that the *recentness* of comps can have on literature, as new titles are required to align strategically with recent, or even *ongoing,* trends. When considering the context of the marketplace, one of my participants reported,

> "I think about how [a book I want to acquire] relates to the market and if it fits into a pattern we're seeing in one way or another but doesn't feel too familiar. […]I try to fit it into the market in one way or another."

This comment suggests that market patterns extend beyond consumer trends to consumer *feelings*, the experience of reading a book: or, what my participants have broadly termed style. While participants did not define style with any rigor, they elaborated on their understanding of "style" when I asked them about trends in comp titles—that is, if they saw any books comped to with greater frequency, or if they were able to identify trends in comps. As they provided hypothetical examples of good comp titles drawn from recently published fiction, they began to articulate a preference for the sorts of playful but accessible formally innovative novels published by literary imprints.[63] As one editor distilled it, frequently cited comps are "The books that… have a distinct kind of form and that work."

[63] This principle is not restricted to literary imprints, though my participants all work at these more prestigious houses. Each segment of the market has their own stylistic benchmarks, and regardless of what those specific criteria are, the principle holds: editors are selecting comps from a very shallow pool.

A distinct kind of form that works. This description suggests a sort of form that is unique and recognizable ("distinct"), while remaining commercially accessible and financially successful ("that works"). Participants' examples of "good" comps support this claim. In addition to frequent mentions of Colson Whitehead and George Saunders (*Lincoln in the Bardo*, in particular), I was told, "A few years ago you had everyone saying this is like [Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the] Goon Squad*, because it's like, 'See? It's a novel in stories!'" Alternately, another participant reported, "I've noticed *The Department of Speculation* [by Jenny Offill] being used for novels. Maybe that's because it's that sort of form where it felt like memoir, but it's a novel." In other words, editors long for books that are unique enough to hook an audience but not so daring as to alienate an audience. As with sales figures, moderation rules the day: formally distinct, commercially accessible books satisfy both the editor's desire to produce quality literature while also meeting the demands of the corporate bottom line. A "risk-proof style."

There are simply not many books that fit these editors' criteria published annually, let alone when restricted to a 3-5 year span, to say nothing of financial viability or stylistic alignment. The potential for innovation is thus severely limited. Comp titles ensure that contemporary literature continues to remake itself in its own present image, eliminating financial risk and severely restricting the horizon for potential innovation. This is *not* to say that exemplary, innovative, or challenging literature cannot be made. But if that exemplary, innovative, or challenging literature *sells,* it will likely end up as a comp. Those innovative texts thus become normalized, targets at which aspiring authors aim. By analyzing trends in comp title data, we might get better purchase on what, precisely, my participants mean

by "a distinct kind of form." Or, more to the point, we might better clarify what implicit preconditions must be met in order for that form to "work."

Editors' preferential "risk-proof style," reveals itself in the data in two ways, primarily: first, in the most frequently invoked comps, and second, in the authors with the greatest influence. In terms of both a distinct literary form and an authorial voice—two important aspects of how my participants seem to be defining "style"—we can begin to understand the effect of comps on the marketplace broadly.

Table 2: Most frequently cited comp titles, 2016.

Title	***Author***	***PubDate***	***Genre***	***Count***
The Flamethrowers	Rachel Kushner	04-2013	Literary	12
Luckiest Girl Alive	Jessica Knoll	05-2015	Thriller/Suspense	12
Saints of the Shadow Bible	Ian Rankin	02-2015	Mystery/Detective	11
The Rosie Project	Graeme Simison	10-2013	Commercial	11
Police	Jo Nesbo	07-2014	Mystery/Detective	10
The Middlesteins	Jami Attenberg	10-2012	Commercial	10
Reconstructing Amelia	Kimberly McCreight	04-2013	Thrillers/Suspense	9
Station Eleven	Emily St. John Mandel	09-2014	Literary	9
The Shining Girls	Lauren Beukes	06-2013	Thriller/Suspense	9
Where'd You Go, Bernadette?	Maria Semple	08-2012	Commercial	9
Wool	Hugh Howey	03-2013	Science Fiction	9
In a Dark, Dark Wood	Ruth Ware	08-2015	Thriller/Suspense	8
The Interestings	Meg Wolitzer	04-2013	Commercial	8
The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.	Adelle Waldman	07-2013	Commercial	8

These trends in comp titles provide a fascinating back-end view of the literary trends that shaped acquisition in 2016. The data suggests that, within a given genre, literary trends are usually best represented by only 1 or 2 titles per year (see table 1). In 2016, the titles with the most influence over the production of literary fiction were *The*

Flamethrowers by Rachel Kushner and *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel. There seems to be greater diffusion amongst commercial fiction (a generic descriptor that surely means as little as "literary fiction"), though there appears to have been a clear preference for family dramas. *The Interestings* and *The Middlesteins* appear to be named after family surnames, meanwhile *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* and *The Rosie Project* feature daughters attempting to better identify (and identify with) their biological parents. The usual suspects in genre fiction also appear on our Top Comps list, with thrillers carrying the day; we can see the emergence of the much-maligned "girl" trend with *Luckiest Girl Alive* and *The Shining Girls*. What stands out, however, is just how few books influence decisions about acquisitions and give shape to the marketplace, particularly for literary fiction.

Representation and Authorial "Voice"

Comps titles not only lead to a flattening of literary innovation through an insistence on an attention to the present; they also replicate and even exacerbate existing inequities in the literary field through their insistence on authorial identity and "voice." While participants were less-than-rigorous with their definition of "voice," the concept seemed to be rooted in authorial identity categories inasmuch as market share. My participants were particularly keen on discussing the affinity between author and audience, such that "voice" became a sort of shorthand for a host of identity categories, spanning race, class, gender, and sexuality. This definition of voice emerged in interviews when I asked participants to clarify what, precisely, they meant by "voice." I want to return to a particularly rich, previously quoted statement to illustrate this concept. When discussing voice and style, one of my participants reported,

> You get into the type of author that somebody is, and the type of audience that they're reaching more than you do content. And that is very voice-driven. […] There's a limited number of readers for a book like that, and you kind of know who they are and what books those people are responding to.

For this editor, voice has as much to do with the match between audience and author *as types*, defining readers in terms of the books and authors to which they respond. While this is particularly significant for market-share, editors' further comments about *types* of authors and readers proves illuminating—particularly when editors characterized moments of difficulty finding the right comps because of an author's pesky, unclassifiable "voice." One particularly telling example, at length:

> I'm thinking of an example of a book that I bid on and lost at auction that was set in Appalachia. It was a very female-focused story about Appalachia, when a lot of [books about Appalachia] are more male. That was the feel of it. That book had a really raw voice, and was also about women. And a lot of the comp titles were more polished and were about men. And that was a conversation that my boss and I had for a long time. Like, is it fair to compare this book to these things, because there might be an audience difference because of the voice or the characters? […] And as closely aligned as we can get, the better.

In elaborating on this example of a failed acquisition, this editor was clearly using "voice" to signal gender. Not only was the novel "female-focused," but the voice itself—"raw" and "about women" as opposed to the more "polished" novels "about men"—suggested a potential difference in audience. Voice, in this example, gestures toward an

identity-based alignment between author and audience; an accurate comp title will exhibit a similar internal alignment (i.e., between *that* author and *that* audience) and appeal to the *same* identity categories.

If voice is based in identity categories, then editors' ability to assess that voice—their credibility—is often rooted on their relationship to the author and audience. Editors reported that their identities matter significantly in establishing their credibility within their imprint and within the industry broadly. If an editor falls within the target audience for an acquisition, or is somewhat similar to the author, her opinions hold more weight. One of my participants, calling himself an "old millennial," described being called upon in an Acquisitions Meeting to offer an opinion on a book: "The other day, somebody had a book that was like 'for millennials,'"—he pantomimed air quotes over our video chat—"and the publisher was like, 'Kevin![64] You're our millennial expert!'" Later, he continued about milliennial-based comps, "If it's by a millennial, and it's by a woman, you'll get a lot of 'It's like Lena Dunham!'" Several participants, all fairly young editors, reported several instances in which their age mattered significantly when persuading their older superiors that they could envision an audience for a book, and should acquire.

So, "voice" is often a sense of affinity between author and audience, often along gender, racial, class, or age lines. Editors are in a much better position to fight for an author or book that they admire if they represent a target demographic—when they are a part of the target audience, when the author's voice speaks to them, directly. Comp titles must reflect this voice-based alignment in order to be considered accurate, and for a book to be successfully acquired and marketed—in order for a large, multinational corporation to

[64] Not his real name.

make a sizable investment in an author and her long-term career success. In this context, the standardizing effect that comp titles have on acquisitions serve to restrict access to mainstream publication, reproducing and exacerbating the inequalities in the literary field in the name of mere quantification and supposedly neutral sales data. While participants spoke in terms of age and gender as primary identity categories by which they identify and define authorial "voice," the absence of race in their examples is particularly significant.

If, as I have argued, comp titles represent a sort of "hypothetical ideal" for editors, then the 2016 data paint a bleak picture of the status of racial representation in the publishing industry. I want to return to Table 1: the most frequently cited comp titles of 2016. While these data certainly reveal the preponderance of literary trends, it is also notable that not a single book by a writer of color appears on this list. Admittedly, I was surprised to find that the most frequently invoked comps in 2016 were written by women (*The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner and *Luckiest Girl Alive* by Jessica Knoll), and that 71% of the books on this list of high frequency comps were written by women. Given my participants' emphasis on the identification of audience to author, content, and characters, I presumed that male authors would have dominated the list. Indeed, this list of frequently invoked comp titles seems to reflect industry commonplace that more woman purchase books, and that women read at a greater volume than men. Yet, despite the seeming equality between (cis-) gender authors in comp titles, there is no racial diversity in this list. No book by an author of color enjoyed a high degree of influence over the entirety of the literary marketplace in 2016. Though genre fiction does appear to have some influence, "African American" and "Urban" genre categories do not have the same degree of pull as the supposedly-inclusive genres of "thrillers" and "literary." White authors dominate comp

titles in the most influential genres (perhaps those genres such as "literary fiction" and "thrillers" that are presumed neutral); given this racial disparity, we must consider comp titles as not merely a descriptive—*this book is like that book*—but as prescriptive—*this book should be like that book.*

To consider the prescriptive qualities of comps in terms of authorial identity, we must move beyond single-titles and consider authors' careers in whole. In the 2016 comp data, the most frequently cited authors are those who wrote the most frequently cited comps; Rachel Kushner and Jessica Knoll top this list with 12 each. But this seems to be an incomplete measurement of author influence. It is less appropriate to say that Rachel Kushner, as a writer, has had a vast influence over the literary market than that *The Flamethrowers* struck a cord with potential authors and acquiring editors. It is plausible that an author may be mentioned fewer times in total, but with many more books selected as comps. And, indeed, that proved to be the case (see table 3).

Table 3: Most influential authors in 2016.

Author	***Titles***	***Number of Comps***	***Influence Score***
Ian McEwan	*The Children Act* *Sweet Tooth* *On Chesil Beach* *Atonement*	6	24
Joshua Ferris	*Then We Came to the End* *The Unnamed* *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*	5	15
Elizabeth Strout	*Amy and Isabel* *The Burgess Boys* *Olive Kitteridge*	4	12
Jonathan Tropper	*One Last Thing Before I Go* *This Is Where I Leave You* *The Book of Joe*	3	9
Fredrik Backman	*A Man Called Ove* *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*	4	8

Table 3 (cont'd)

Garth Risk Hallberg	*A Field Guide to the North American Family* *City on Fire*	4	8
Marilynne Robinson	*Home* *Lila*	4	8
Colm Toibin	*Nora Webster* *Brooklyn*	4	8
Sarah Waters	*The Paying Guests* *The Little Stranger*	4	8
Jonathan Franzen	*Purity* *The Corrections*	3	6
Lauren Groff	*Fates and Furies* *American Wife*	3	6
Nicole Kraus	*Great House* *The History of Love*	3	6
Ben Lerner	*10:04* *Leaving the Atocha Station*	3	6
Claire Messud	*The Woman Upstairs* *The Emperor's Children*	3	6
David Mitchell	*The Bone Clocks* *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*	3	6
Karen Russell	*Swamplandia!* *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*	3	6
Jess Walter	*Beautiful Ruins* *The Financial Lives of the Poets*	3	6
Jeannette Winterson	*The Passion* *The Gap of Time*	3	6

I isolated the most frequently cited authors of comp titles, and then eliminated all authors with a 1:1 author:book ratio (as in Kushner); the remaining authors are all authors with a comparatively high author:book ratio, and whose books were frequently invoked as comps. The authors that remain, I'd argue, are those whose writing style, or authorial voice, may be more influential; no one book in this author's oeuvre dramatically shaped the marketplace in 2016 (again, as in Kushner), but that author's style remains influential. An

imperfect measure, we might calculate an influence score by multiplying the number of books by a single author by the number of time they were comped to in total in order to best demonstrate an author's potential influence over literary production. (In this case, Ian McEwan emerges as the most influential individual author of 2016; four of his novels were comped to 6 times, yielding an influence score of 24.) In contrast to the overwhelming influence of books written by women (~71% of most frequently invoked comps), the majority of most frequently invoked *authors* are men (~55%), with men taking four of the top five slots (McEwan, Ferris, Tropper, Backman). Yet, as with the Top Comps list, the most influential authors are all, also, white. While each of my participants mentioned Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* as a particularly influential comp (though, as a novel published in 2016, it is not reflected in the comps data), Whitehead does not appear to be an author that has had a longstanding stylistic influence on the field. His one novel may appear to be incredibly influential in 2017 and onward, but Whitehead's influence as evident across his many novels has not changed the way that editors acquire.

We know that the publishing industry is overwhelmingly white, staffed and led by professionals who identify as such. In 2015, *Publisher's Weekly* reported that 89% of employees in the publishing industry self-identify as white.[65] As we saw in Chapter One, literary agent Nicole Aragi is especially significant as one of the fiercest champions of writers of color in the contemporary—yet, this is hardly an encouraging finding, in that Aragi is one of the few agents willing to represent strenuously represent writers of color in

[65] See Deahl, "Why Publishing Is So White." All but one of my participants self-identifies as white—a particularly important finding when considering my reliance on a snowball sampling method, reflecting the existing social and professional relationships that exist among editors; in other words, only one person of color circulates within the field as my participants understand it.

the United States. If an editor's—or an agent's—racial and/or gender identity matter in terms of establishing their expertise and their ability to credibly envision and articulate an audience for a book, then the persistence of whiteness as defining a profession does not suggest an equitable future for writers of color.

In 2011, Roxane Gay reported that 90% of books reviewed in the *New York Times*—one highly significant metric of prestige—were written by Caucasian writers.[66] Drawing on her own experience, Gay writes, "It is difficult for any writer to get a book published. We're all clawing. However, if you are a writer of color, not only do you face a steeper climb getting your book published, you face an even more arduous journey if you want that book to receive critical attention." Comp title data provide us with a partial understanding of what makes the climb so steep, what makes the journey so arduous. These data not only tell us about the relative lack of influence that writers of color have over the acquisition of literary fiction, they also tell us something about the experience of writers of color who are attempting to sell a book. Influential comp titles—those that will prompt a publisher to make a sizable investment in an author and a book, both in terms of the advance and the marketing budget—have all been written by white authors. For a writer of color to be deemed a worthwhile investment by the publishing industry and literary establishment, they must be favorably and accurately compared to a white writer. While, as Mark McGurl has shown, creative writing MFAs like Iowa may claim to help aspiring writers of color

[66] Gay reports, "We looked at 742 books reviewed, across all genres. Of those 742, 655 were written by Caucasian authors (1 transgender writer, 437 men, and 217 women). Thirty-one were written by Africans or African Americans (21 men, 10 women), 9 were written by Hispanic authors (8 men, 1 woman), 33 by Asian, Asian-American or South Asian writers (19 men, 14 women), 8 by Middle Eastern writers (5 men, 3 women) and 6 were books written by writers whose racial background we were simply unable to identify." Ongoing computational work in book reviews by Andrew Piper and Richard Jean So confirms Gay's bleak account. See Roxane Gay, "Where Things Stand."

claim a more "authentic" writerly voice—and, indeed, access to an otherwise whitewashed world of corporate publishing—it would appear that the publishing industry has very little use for that voice unless it can accurately comp white.[67]

These data tell a story about the homogenization of literary style, as well as the homogenization of authorial representation—or "voice," as my participants seemed to be deploying the term. This data does not allow us to ascribe any causality to comp titles; based on this data, we cannot reasonably argue that comp titles have *caused* racial inequity in the field. Aside from the fact that such a claim is not justified by statistical evidence, it would also be foolish to suggest that a lack of racial equality was somehow brought about by conglomeration; institutional racism has long defined the literary field. In refusing to attribute causality to comp titles, I do not mean to suggest that comps are merely "reflecting" the racial inequality of the field. It is not my intention to somehow let editors and comps off the hook as innocently mirroring a large-scale problem in which they play no active part. Rather, I argue that comps are a part of a complex problem of racial inequality in the literary field, codifying the discrimination that writers of color have faced informally in a variety of venues. It seems clear that comps, at the very least, perpetuate the racial inequities of the literary field by virtue of the principle of accuracy that they demand.

[67] In his influential study *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl argued that the "find your voice" narrative that dominates the creative writing program (typified by the Iowa MFA) was especially influential for writers of color. In the MFA program, voice—essential to all post-war fiction—could be "'claimed' in defiance of the silencing forces of social oppression and cultural standardization" (236). More positively echoing the language of my participants, voice in the MFA program was corporeal, a reflection of a writer's identity and subject position.

Prestige

If comp titles tell us a story about contemporary literary standardization, they also tell us a story about contemporary literary prestige. Comp titles are important paratexts, signaling to industry insiders a publisher's aspirations for a book—and, indeed, for their imprint. Let's return to that rebellious 2% of comp titles published prior to 2000, and to the editors that selected them. These comps serve as a counterpoint to the literary presentism I've identified through trends in comp titles—and may, perhaps, suggest an alternative measure of literary value in the contemporary. Comping to titles published prior to 2000 seems to defeat the very purpose that comps are designed to serve. Publishers can make no educated guesses about circulation, advances, or print run. Do we read this 2% as willfully indifferent? Professionally incompetent? When we take a look at the imprints responsible for this 2%, it appears that there is another dynamic at play.

Table 4: Imprints with pre-2000 comps.

Imprint	*Parent Company*	*Genre/Type*	*Total*
Knopf	Penguin Random House	Literary	13
NYRB Classics	Penguin Random House	Literary	10
Orbit	Hachette Book Group	Science Fiction, Fantasy	9
Seven Stories Press	Penguin Random House	Independent, Literary, Political	8
Archipelago	Independent	Independent	4
Back Bay Books	Hachette Book Group	Commercial Fiction	4
Lee Boudreaux	Hachette Book Group	Literary	4
Pantheon	Penguin Random House	Independent, Literary	4
Redhook	Hachette Book Group	Commercial Fiction	4
Titan Books	Penguin Random House	Science Fiction, Fantasy, Crime	4
Anchor	Penguin Random House	Trade paperback (nonfiction)	3
Melville House	Penguin Random House	Literary fiction, trade paperbacks	2
Mulholland Books	Hachette Book Group	Mystery, thrillers, suspense	2
New Europe Books	Penguin Random House	Global, cross-cultural fiction	2
Pushkin Vertigo	Penguin Random House	Suspense, thriller	2

The list is split between two types of imprints: first, imprints that publish literary fiction of high quality, including literature in translation (Knopf, NYRB Classics, Pantheon), as well as imprints that publish some of the usual suspects in "genre fiction"—sci fi, fantasy, and crime.[68] I want to focus on the literary imprints, and Knopf in particular. More than indifference or incompetence, I'd argue that these comps represent an act of subtle subversion—what James English has referred to as "playing the game," within the larger economy of prestige. Clearly, each of these literary imprints understands the importance of comp titles in acquisitions. Yet, they stop *just short* of an outright rejection, selecting comps that my participants would have identified as "utterly useless." As the most literary imprint at the largest of the Big Five, Knopf has some symbolic capital to throw around. These comps issue a backhanded challenge by privileging aesthetic over commercial imperatives. And, by all accounts, this gamble has paid off: it is precisely their rejection of the mechanisms of conglomeration that compounds the imprint's prestige *within that system*. Let's consider their pre-2000 comps.

Table 5: Knopf pre-2000 comps.

Main Title	Main Title Author	Comp Title	Comp Title Author	Pub Date
Who Killer Piet Barol?	Richard Mason	The Passion	Winterson, Jeanette	1987
The Nix	Nathan Hill	White Noise	DeLillo, Don	1985
The Nix	Nathan Hill	American Pastoral	Roth, Philip	1998
The Nix	Nathan Hill	The World According To Garp	Irving, John	1978
Divorce Is In The Air	Gonzalo Torne	The Elementary Particles	Houellebecq, Michel	1998

[68] This might yet tell us about the way that genre constitutes itself historically in so-called "genre fiction" like sci-fi. Sci-fi, perhaps, is a more historically constituted genre (as opposed to the nebulously-defined "literary fiction"). Put another way, sci-fi may have a greater attention to its historic development as a genre, and a greater degree of historic referentiality. More data is necessary to support these tentative claims.

Table 5 (cont'd)

The Innocent Have Nothing To Fear	Stuart Stevens	Primary Colors: A Novel Of Politics	Klein, Joe	1996
The Innocent Have Nothing To Fear	Stuart Stevens	American Hero	Beinhart, Larry	1993
The Innocent Have Nothing To Fear	Stuart Stevens	The Running Mate	Klein, Joe	2000
Homegoing	Yaa Gyasi	The Bluest Eye	Morrison, Toni	1970
Homegoing	Yaa Gyasi	Breath, Eyes, Memory	Danticat, Edwidge	1994
Wintering	Peter Geye	Plainsong	Haruf, Kent	1999

While these 6 titles may not appear to be significant, Knopf only published 19 titles in 2016; 32% of their annual titles were assigned a comp that was written prior to 2000. A brief scan of the comps suggests less catalog data than a *syllabus*. We get a sense of Knopf's aspirations for their titles. A doorstop of a novel by Nathan Hill, *The Nix* is clearly in the running to define a literary generation, in the vein of Don Delillo and Philip Roth, with John Irving dispelling fears about the novel's accessibility. Likewise, Knopf has high hopes for Yaa Gyasi and her debut novel *Homecoming*. Knopf editors did not pick just *any* debut novel about race in America as their comp; they picked *Toni Morrison's* debut novel about race in America. In Knopf's comps, we can read the persistence of what Mark McGurl has called a "high cultural pluralism," that defined the Program Era and continues to govern the more prize-aspirational, literary imprints of the contemporary: a "joining [of] the aesthetic values of literary modernism with an autoethnographic cultural specificity" (244). Because comps must be *accurate*, good faith comparisons, we can read these titles as making a powerful argument about the respective positions of Gyasi and Hill in the field. Inasmuch as comps are a mechanism for increased literary homogenization within multimedia

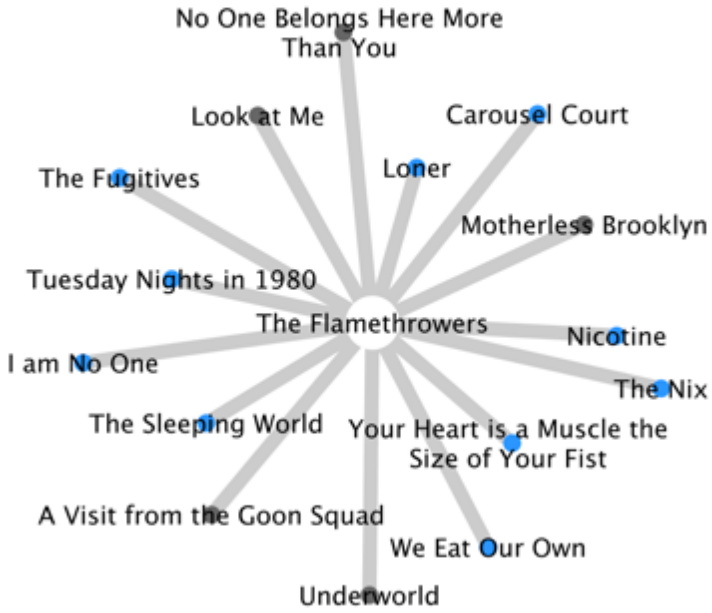
conglomerates; they are also a useful tool for achieving a degree of prestige that system. These comps do not attest to literary homogenization, but rather, literary *distinction*.

V. Comp Titles and Not-So-Distant Reading

How might attention to comp titles change the way that we read contemporary novels? Or, better yet, how might comps change the way that we *read*? Part of the value of focusing on comps is that it provides us an immediate network or context in which to situate and read a single novel, or a cluster of novels. According to editors, these novels are all similar to one another, and representative of corporate publishing's greatest aspirations. Rather than a "distant reading," we could think of this method as more like a "mid-range reading," considering the family resemblances between a group of novels that all, in some way, best exemplify the tastes of the corporation. The data *around* texts can serve as the basis for a comparative, sociological reading of the literary field.

Let's consider the most influential novel of 2016: Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*. (See figure 8.) Kushner's novel has been used as a very persuasive piece of data. It not only leads for comps in its genre (literary fiction), but it also leads for comps overall. Each of these novels is a first-level comp to *The Flamethrowers*—either used to describe *The Flamethrowers* when it was released in 2013 (grey nodes), or books published in 2016 that invoked *The Flamethrowers* as a comparison point (blue nodes).

Figure 8: Comped to *The Flamethrowers*



Just as network analyses of literary agents and prizewinning fiction might help us better understand a sort of family resemblance between novels, locating sociological reading through a single figure's taste, so too do these comp-clusters help us understand a novel in relationship to its industrial peers. Examining these clusters can further help us to understand what editors may mean by "style." Several of these novels are set in New York—Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*, much of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* Kea Wilson's *We Eat Our Own*, Christopher Sorrentino's *The Fugitives,* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld,* at minimum. Perhaps "style" has to do with a particular geographic sensibility, and, as such, we should read *The Flamethrowers* as a New York Novel (not unreasonably). A number of these novels are about writers and artists, suggesting that "style" may be more a matter of topic or characterization. Curiously, a short story collection is included as a comp for *The Flamethrowers*—Miranda July's *Nobody Belongs Here More*

than You. The Flamethrowers does have an anecdotal quality to it, alternating between narrators' perspectives. Given the structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as "a novel in stories," and the similar structural bent of *Underworld*, perhaps "style" might be best understood as narrative structure.

"Style" might also be a stand-in for "prestige," signaling the publisher's hopes for *The Flamethrowers*; a number of these novels were nominated for major awards. Perhaps this cluster thus helps us to understand how the publishing industry understands the current economy of prestige—the books that they groom for awards, and therefore, the particular stylistic or formal benchmarks that ambitious literary writers must meet. In other words, *The Flamethrowers* and its comps may be the publishing industry's equivalent of "Oscar bait." Likewise, this cluster might help us understand generic categories such as the upmarket or more broadly, literary fiction; *The Flamethrowers* is comped to a stand-out in upmarket fiction—Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*—but Don DeLillo's presence in this constellation suggests that it may tend toward the more literary end of the commercial – upmarket – literary spectrum. While I have shown that comps *tend* to be premised on authorial identity categories, *The Flamethrowers* is comped to novels by an equal number of men and women. Perhaps this apparent audience-reach accounts for *The Flamethrowers*' popularity as a comp; likewise, it might clarify the ways that literary fiction might transcend the upmarket, as the latter category is tied to genre fiction which tends to be more traditionally gendered. Perhaps more than the descriptions of editors, the comp data—and the clusters within—may help us better understand the nature of literary style as understood by corporate publishers.

Finally, comps—if not this cluster specifically, then the idea of literary comparison itself—might also provide a contextual grounding through which we might close-read a novel by considering the systems through which a novel must travel and to which it must appeal. *The Flamethrowers*—by the numbers, the most influential comp of 2016—allegorizes this system through its main character, Reno, and her work as an artistic professional in New York of the 1970s. Though Reno is an artist herself, she works behind-the-scenes at a film production lab, serving at once as the basis for and locus of aesthetic comparison, while also changing as a result of these comparative acts.

VI. Comp Titles and Allegories of Production

The Flamethrowers allegorizes the development of a corporate aesthetic, the fusion of art and industry; moreover, Kushner's novel raises significant questions about the stakes of literary datafication. At its center is a woman named Reno, a motorcycle enthusiast, filmmaker, and land artist, who moves to the New York City art-world of 1975. Aspiring to work in film, Reno responds to an ad in the paper that reads:

> YOUR FACE AS UNIVERSAL STANDARD
> Young, good posture, good grooming, with
> rudimentary film knowledge, able to follow
> directions please apply. (81)

This rather mysterious job ad for a "universal standard face" is for that of a "China girl." As Reno describes it:

> Every movie had what was known as a China girl on the film leader. The first one wasn't Chinese. None of them were. No one was quite sure why they

> were called China girls, since they were a printing reference for Caucasian skin, there for the lab technicians, who needed a human face to make color corrections among various shots, stocks, and lighting conditions. If the curtains in a film looked tennis-ball chartreuse and not some paler shade of yellow, it made no difference to the viewer. There is no original set of curtains they needed to resemble. Flesh is different. Flesh needs to resemble flesh. It has a norm, a referent. The China girl. Curtains can be acid-bright, but not faces. And if faces look wrong, we question everything. (86-87).

China girls are to remain invisible to the audience; they serve a technical function only. Like the editor, Reno's work is vital but mostly invisible except to the professionals who know to look for her. As the "universal standard," she becomes the basis of comparisons, an index according to which films are calibrated. This process, too, is both technical and aesthetic. Technicians mix chemicals to treat celluloid, all in the service of a normalized, realistic aesthetic experience for the viewer. So while the audience does not see Reno, they see the *effects* of her presence on screen, in color that appears standardized and consistent.

Reno is not special, she tells us. "Their ordinariness was part of their appeal: real but untouchable women who left no sense of who they were. No clue but a Kodak color bar, which was no clue at all." (86-87) All that really matters, "was a natural skin tone—any living female would do—in contrast to the color chart." (139-40) But, realistically, any living female will *not* do. Caucasian skin, equated with the "natural skin tone," becomes the basis for the standardization of film stock, explicitly encoding whiteness *as industry standard*. This standardization is not merely in service of the viewer's experience, lest they

question everything; rather, it is ideologically opposed to difference in its insistence on a family resemblance—"a norm, a referent."

Likewise, in leaving "no clue but a Kodak color bar," Reno's identity gives way to the brand she represents; while the China girl may be anonymous, the corporation is not: this is *Kodachrome* color, made by *Kodak*. As a sort of proto-brand ambassador, Reno's behavior on-screen changes, even though no one will see her. She holds the color chart "lovingly in my hands like it was the answer to a television game show question" (140). As the one responsible for providing key data points according to which film is both aesthetically and technically standardized—her skin, for one, but also the color chart she holds lovingly—Reno is participating in a larger project: branding. Reno's face is not the universal standard; Kodak is the universal standard. She is not only assisting in the development of a corporate aesthetic in color standardization, but she is *aestheticizing the corporation*.

Note the shift from "they" to "we" in this passage. Reno calls China girls "they," even though she is one. She solidly places herself in the "we" of "the viewer." In identifying herself as an audience member, Reno downplays her complicity in a corporate system of artistic production and standardization. I recognize this move: it's one that my participants made often. These mandates for data-driven acquisitions are handed down from on-high, and they roll their eyes: "What are you going to do?" They choose not to think about the effect that comps have had on the system writ large and continue with their work, in hopes of, one day, acquiring a book that they can be proud to have worked on. But if we are to read *The Flamethrowers* as an allegory for the relationship between corporation and artistic production in the contemporary—as I think that we should— we must think much

more critically about the *uses* to which the data of and around texts are put. How that data is instrumentalized, and to what end. As ideal representatives of corporate, risk-proof style, frequently invoked comps like *The Flamethrowers* not only serve as important data points for *other* texts, but also for the literary institutions that have claimed and produced them. The development of what Reno calls a "universal standard," what my participants called a "distinct kind of form that works," and what I've called a "risk-proof style" is but the inevitable outcome of a field dominated by just five corporations. *The Flamethrowers* suggests that the sort of homogenization that comp title data has produced in contemporary literature might be read, in fact, as an exercise in corporate branding.

VII. Conclusion

I want to return to Ben Lerner in closing—a terrible comp for Kushner, but a novel that is keenly aware of the networks that produced it, and in which it circulates. Lerner is aware that *10:04* would *not* have been acquired without his first book as a comp, and he acknowledges the force of a corporate aesthetic on his second novel. And, thanks to his agent's instruction, he is aware that there are new expectations for his writing now that he is being published by a major house. Back to dinner:

> "Of course, as we talked about, there are risks to taking a big advance—because of the book doesn't sell at all, nobody's going to want to work with you again… Just remember this is your opportunity to reach a wider audience. You have to decide who you want your audience to be, who you think it is," my agent said, and what I heard was: "Develop a clear, geometrical plot;

> describe faces, even those at the next table; make sure the protagonist undergoes a dramatic transformation" (156).

Lerner hears his agent's advice as nothing but homogenization at work, clarifying the nature of the risk ("no one will work with you") and advising him on how to inoculate his work accordingly. Lerner has already protested to this ethic of sameness when working with his editor at *The New Yorker*, earlier in the novel: "I wasn't going to be one of those people[…] who lets *The New Yorker* standardize his work; I wasn't going to make a cut whose primary motivation was, on some level, the story's marketability" (56). And yet, as Lerner narrates his skepticism at his agent's advice for the novel, he writes:

> "A quiet set of couples left the table beside us and almost instantly a loud set of couples took their place; the men, both around my age, both dressed in dark suits, both in great shape, were talking about a friend or colleague in common, mocking him for drunkenly spilling red wine on a priceless couch or rug; the women, eyes lined with shadow, were passing a cell phone back and forth, admiring a picture of something. I was confident my book wouldn't sell." (156).

For as much as Lerner scoffs at his agent, he does *precisely* what she has asked him to do. Faces are described, the protagonist transforms. He delivers precisely what he knows his editor will want. For all his protestation, for all his resistance to literary homogenization, Lerner complies (if somewhat passive aggressively). He remains a critical darling. He wins some prizes. He "maintains the reputation of the house." But the changes were made. This is corporate publishing at work.

CHAPTER THREE:

Authors

I. " The Purges"

In September 2003, the International Necronautical Society, a "semi-fictitious avant-garde network," issued a press release:

> ----- ----- and ---- ------ [names redacted by the INS] are expelled as they have become complicit with a publishing industry whereby the 'writer' becomes merely the executor of a brief dictated by corporate market research, reasserting the certainties of middle-brow aesthetics ('issues' of 'contemporary culture', 'post-colonial identity' etc.) under the guise of genuine creative speculation. The INS Executive Council expresses some sympathy towards both ----- and ------, and recognises that they had to write 'to order' in this way in order to be published by the corporate presses in the first place. However, their decision to do so renders them useless to the INS. ("The Purges") [69]

When he penned this press release and initiated the Purge of the First Committee, INS General Secretary Tom McCarthy had not yet published his first novel, *Remainder*, with a corporate press. He had not yet been the subject of a glowing review by Zadie Smith, a review that would cement his place among the international literary elite. He had not yet been shortlisted for the Man Booker—*twice*. Such an antipathy toward corporate publishing and the status of the writer in the contemporary is understandable when one

[69] This press release, "Issued by Anthony Auerbach, INS Chief of Propaganda (Archiving and Epistemological Critique) via official agents," is appended with a message that wards off any too-serious reading, "*Official INS propaganda may be freely distributed, distorted, appropriated or adapted as the reader sees fit.*"

remains outside of such institutions. Yet this press release is just one of a number of public statements that McCarthy has made in opposition to contemporary publishing, representative of his standard line of critique, maintained even after his consecration by the corporate world. McCarthy has repeatedly rejected the aesthetic commitments of middlebrow fiction, or upmarket literary fiction, as imposed in the wake of the publishing industry's consolidation from independent firms to international media conglomerates. He frequently lampoons the corporate standards and tactics of the publishing industry in his essays and book reviews. In his lukewarm review of Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*, McCarthy invokes "marketing people," discussing Hall's novel in terms of its "USP, or, 'Unique Selling Point," with no small amount of distaste. McCarthy positions himself outside of market demands, opposing not only the bottom-line influenced practices of media conglomerates (as discussed in Chapter 2), but also genteel institutions of any kind. Yet, despite his denunciations, and perhaps against his will, McCarthy has been conclusively inducted into the literary establishment: twice short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, profiled in gossipy tones in *The Guardian*, and exhibiting with the INS at the Tate Modern. Outsider though he may fashion himself, McCarthy's fiction operates quite successfully, driven by his own author platform.

In this chapter, I shift from a consideration of the middlemen of literary production (agents and editors) to the middlemen of literary reception (authors and distributers). This project has followed the path of publication, focusing on the many hands that shape a book as a cultural product; pointedly, the author has been displaced as the primary producer or the sole creative genius responsible for the birth of a literary product. I have shown a number of middling figures—the agent, the editor—become an author's creative

collaborators, thereby imprinting a novel with the corporation's colophon, responding both to the neoliberal managerial practices of the publishing industry and market demands. Though I have challenged the notion of writerly authority in order to demonstrate a more pervasive mode of corporate creativity, I do not mean to suggest that writers are insignificant within the Big Five. Rather, the nature of authorship is shifting; what the INS identifies as complicity with neoliberal corporate practices— market research, writing "to order"—is, in fact, a necessary precondition for publication in the contemporary, a reflection of the changing habitus of authorship under multimedia conglomerates. The contemporary author's work continues long after the contracts are signed or the galleys approved. When published by a corporate house, whether one of the Big Five or a mid-sized publisher, authors must play an active role in the marketing of their book. They take on a second professional role, collaborating with sales and marketing teams to develop a "platform": a comprehensive brand and strategy for self-promotion, of which their book is just one part. Authors now market their books—and their personalities—in the pages of newspapers and magazines, on blogs and in YouTube videos, in interviews and on festival stages. As Marketer-in-Chief of their books as cultural products, authors' paraliterary platforms both define their brand and shape their novel's reception for the reading audience.[70] Thus, the author becomes yet another middleman that shapes a book's production and reception.

[70] In *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Post-war America,* Merve Emre argues that this is, in fact, a historic phenomenon (though, I show that the language of the author platform, as such, is a product of late-stage conglomeration and the advent of social media, in particular). Paraliterary texts such as those that comprise an author platform have played a vital role in literary history, shaping how we read inasmuch as what we read.

To consider the development of the author platform and the new expectations for authorship in the age of multimedia conglomerates, I trace the development of the platform as a corporate strategy, showing how the platform emerges as a product of late-stage conglomeration, and in the advent of social media, in particular. The platform, as both author-brand and paratext, becomes a lens through which we might read the changing nature of authorship in the contemporary field of cultural production. Second, I show how contemporary writers are using their platforms, and the fiction by extension, in order to respond to—and, in many ways, resist—the changes in and pressures of the literary marketplace. I begin by reading Tom McCarthy's platform, giving an account of his publicity strategies and an analysis of the brand that he has developed as the inheritor of the avant-garde. In many ways an anti-platform, McCarthy invokes the historic avant-garde in order to critique the contemporary literature's homogenization under the mechanisms of the corporate publisher, even as he cultivates his own prestige within that system. The avant-garde, for McCarthy, serves not only as a throw-back to some (historically suspect) golden age of publishing, but also as a shorthand for the rejection of the marketplace through the embrace of difficulty—or, through the refusal to concede to the sort of middlebrow readership at whom upmarket literary fiction is aimed.

McCarthy's platform invites us to read his novels as both an extension of a personal brand (McCarthy, the rogue artist) and as a disciplinary reading strategy (meta-critically interpreting his fiction in advance). I therefore conclude by reading two of McCarthy's novels: *C* (2010) and *Satin Island* (2015). *C* elaborates the nature of McCarthy's brand of modernism, showing how the avant-garde (and McCarthy with it) stands in opposition to corporate aesthetic practices. *Satin Island* extends this critique in a (very) thinly-veiled

allegorical meditation on authorship in the contemporary—a sort of field guide for the avant-gardist who finds himself trapped in an international media conglomerate. Through the figure of a corporate anthropologist (himself an accomplished author), McCarthy envisions a future for the author in which the platform becomes not a neoliberal millstone, but a means of sabotage. *C* and *Satin Island* extend and comment on McCarthy's brand and platform, even as his platform provides a template for understanding the novels. Taken together, McCarthy's public performances envision a potential future for the author-as-middleman and the artist in the corporate world.

II. Platforms, Brands, Information Cascades

As the nature of literary agency and editorship changed as a result of increased conglomeration, so too have the status and habitus of authorship transformed as a result of this shifting media and economic landscape. An author is now expected to assist in the process of selling her book, marketing it via the strength of her personality and a comprehensive media strategy called a "platform." On the one hand, this is hardly a new phenomenon. As Evan Brier notes, authors and novelists have always been "essential collaborators in the project of producing belief in the novel's cultural value, cocreators of a promotional pitch" (15). Yet, the sea-change of conglomeration has fundamentally shifted the ways in which authors are expected to collaborate, produce, cocreate, and promote (Brier 15), dramatically the nature of authorship. Authors increasingly need to demonstrate that they will contribute positively to book sales—that their winning personality or insightful cultural criticism will play well on TV, on NPR, or on the festival circuit. A well-developed platform is not a suggestion or a subtle strategy: it is a demand

made explicitly. Industry leaders interviewed by Greco reported that "a media platform or program was now part of what publishers expected authors to bring to the table (along with their book manuscript)"; would-be authors are expected to have cultivated a devoted audience, "whether via the Internet or connections to book buyers or as media personalities or as newspaper columnists" (184). A platform solidly in place is so significant a factor as to determine whether or not a new author should be published, a major bargaining chip for publishers and agents.

Authors have been treated as cultural icons—celebrities, even—for quite some time. Loren Glass has shown that, despite the bifurcation of art and mass culture that dominated the modernist literary landscape and continues to hold sway, modernist writers from Gertrude Stein to Norman Mailer traded in the cachet of literary celebrity, forming veritable cults of personality that sustained their literary work.[71] The anxiety of modernism and mass culture preceded the bestselling, brand-name author that came to dominate the publishing scene of the 1970s and 80s, distinctly a product of conglomerated publishing in pursuit of the "big book." Some critics have gone so far to apply retroactively the contemporary notion of "branding," particularly in regard to those authors who were more deliberate about their personality as a form of literary style; Stephen Brown has read T.S. Eliot's *Bel esprit* project and the sale of "The Waste Land" as a sort of proto-branding enterprise (coining the unfortunate term "author-preneurship" to describe the scheme[72]), while Glass directs our attention further back historically, toward Mark Twain's

[71] See Loren Glass, *Authors, Inc*.
[72] Author-preneurs are not the only type of –preneur of interest to Brown. Also: "poet-preneurs, painter-preneurs, playwright-preneurs, performer-preneurs, composer-preneurs or whatever -preneur fits the bill."

trademarking of his name.[73] Yet, in each of these instances, authorial production drove authorial persona; celebrity was a product of writing, ultimately feeding back into the writing project. The author "platform"—distinct from, coeval to, and often deliberately preceding traditional literary labor—is a new phenomenon, a product of late-stage conglomeration and the intersection of publishing and social media.

A momentary digression to consider the "platform" as a term of art. Though closely related, a platform is distinct from a brand, and neither can be simply explained away as celebrity. "Brand," of course, is derived from the mark burned into cattle to mark ownership—something of a trademark, an imprimatur, a colophon (Brand: "A particular sort or class of goods, as indicated by the trademark on them;" Brand-image: "*n.* the impression of a product in the minds of potential users or consumers; also *transf.* and *fig.*, the general or popular conception of some person or thing,"[74]). By contrast, a platform, long associated with political campaigns, is a strategy—the means by which brand awareness is developed, encompassing and promoting a brand. Platforms include the channels by which a brand is advertised and becomes known, as well as the audiences to whom a brand is marketed and targeted. A brand may be rely on the cachet of celebrity (when, say, Tina Fey writes a book), just as a high-degree of brand awareness and a successful platforming campaign may result in celebrity (brand-name authors like Stephen King, James Patterson, or Danielle Steele). In what follows, I use the term "brand" to refer to authorial reputation, and "platform" as the comprehensive strategy by which that brand is built and furthered.

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[73] See Brown, "Selling Poetry by the Pound" in *Consumption Markets and Mass Culture*. Glass, *Authors, Inc.*

[74] "brand, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/22627. Accessed 9 April 2018.

Platforms are one way that the publishing industry responds to the uncertain market conditions that dictate the production and sale of a book. The goal of a successful platform strategy is to influence the "information cascade" surrounding a book's release, in order to mitigate the uncertainty felt by publishers and potential readers. Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton describe the logic of the "information cascade":

> Readers select or reject a new book not by revealing preferences they already have but by discovering what they like or dislike about a new book. They do not know in advance whether they will enjoy a book before it is published… consumers constantly search for and update information about new books from reviews, advertisements, word of mouth, cover art, displays in bookstores, television (the Oprah factor), author speaking engagements, the Internet, reading groups, etc. They use this informational model, called the 'information cascade' by economists and 'buzz' by marketers, to decide which book to purchase. A positive information cascade makes a book a hit; a negative information cascade almost certainly triggers failure and removal from bookstore shelves in a matter of weeks." (29)

Just as consumers are uncertain about their preferences about an as-yet-unpublished book, so too are publishers uncertain. In Chapters 1 and 2, I have revealed a number of ways that agents and editors attempt to compensate for such uncertainty *pre*-publication; once a book is acquired, and as it is being marketed, the author's platform becomes one way to shape the information cascade. The goal of the platform is to insure that a book's information cascade is positive, and—as the list provided above suggests—authors are crucial in the development of such a positive outcome, appearing on television (a coveted Oprah interview), radio interviews (especially NPR), the festival circuits, and

through their own book review publications (perhaps the most dignified option). Though sociologists and economists agree that there is no "formula" for success, publishers increasingly turn to the public prestige of their authors to positively influence the information cascade, in hopes that their book may just break even, let alone make a profit.

Even still, the likelihood of being a financially successful author, regardless of platforming strategy, is slim. Most books do not turn a profit; many do not even break even.[1] Data from Greco, Rodriguez and Wharton reveals that a "small proportion of authors accounted for a high percentage of all sales," between 1945 and 2005. Perhaps John Grisham's books were "better" than the thousands of other books published, garnering him the status of the bestselling author of the 1990s, but it is far more likely that his books were better advertised, and launched media tie-ins, capturing reader interest. Publishing is a risky industry. If there is a code to crack, however, it is the star author. Thompson argues that brand-name authors are desirable because "their sales are predictable," and because "they are repeaters" (212). Their previous successful novels amount to their media platform, the cultivation of which encourages a writer's eager fans to purchase the next novel; "if the author's career is developing satisfactorily, the publisher can count on cumulative growth: each new book will sell more than the previous one, and the overall trajectory will be a steadily climbing curve" (212). This amounts to a certain type of brand loyalty, in which an author's platform can be capitalized upon continuously. Successful publishing houses manage their brand-name writers by "developing a carefully orchestrated strategy for each author, no two strategies exactly the same, in order to build the author's brand in the mind of their customers—the key buyers at the retail chains—and in the minds of readers, endowing the author with ever greater name recognition and,

if all goes according to plan, gradually expanding the fan base of loyal readers" (215). These "carefully orchestrated strateg[ies]" are author platforms. In other words, the goal of every successful platform strategy is the promotion of an author brand; and a successful brand will lead to repeat sales and reliable profits.

While authors have long occupied the position of cultural celebrity, and while they may have played an active role in the development of their brand, authors were not expected to participate in the direct marketing of their books as such until very recently. Surprisingly, for a directory dedicated to the different markets that a writer might pitch, *Writer's Market* (a useful proxy for measuring the development of industry standards) devoted very little time to authorial promotion, branding, or marketing prior to the 1990s. Indeed, the word "platform" does not appear in the digest prior to 2010. The 1989 edition responded to the changes wrought by conglomeration (namely, the increased emphasis on profit in acquisitions), but "marketing" was restricted to offering rather obvious advice to a would-be author pitching a prospective editor, rather than authorial self-promotion to the reading public. While the digest had become somewhat more attentive to marketing and promotion as a reflection of industry priorities—"Good writing without marketing know-how and persistence might be art, but who's going to know if it never sells?" (5, 1996 edition)—the message to writers was clear: the dirty business of book marketing is best left to the industry professionals.

But the more the mergers, the bigger conglomerates became, *Writer's Market* began to suggest an author consider the potential benefits of self-promotion. In 2005, *Writer's Market* suggested that authors should market their books because publishing houses had become too large to give each book their fifteen minutes—particularly those books by

newer, lesser-known writers. In the marketplace, the author is his own best advocate. "Increasingly, the responsibility of ensuring that the most thorough possible marketing takes place falls upon the author" (85). In contrast to the large, international scale of the conglomerate, *Writer's Market* advises that authors work on a smaller, local scale, urging them to consider promoting their work via book signings at local independent bookstores, press releases in local newspapers, local access television or radio, and speaking gigs with literary organizations, book clubs, or alumni groups; it seems unlikely that such a strategy would yield sizable results, yet *WM* offers this advice as a way of helping authors "take charge of your career" and achieve some degree of personal agency over an unknowable process in a faceless, outsized corporation.

So while strategies for authorial promotion emerged in response to the institutional shifts of conglomeration, authorial promotion and marketing was neither necessary nor particularly effectual until the advent of social media, when any author could cultivate a large audience of potential readers, independent of a publisher's marketing strategy and at no considerable cost. Fast-forward to 2010, when the language of the platform first found its way into the pages of *Writer's Market*. In 2010, *Writer's Market* included an article entitled "Build a Platform or You'll Miss the Train," marking a rather a dramatic departure by suggesting that the author devote a sizable amount of time and energy developing a public persona and cultivate a following of devoted readers in order to secure a book deal in the first place. *WM* advises, "You need to start building your platform as soon as you start writing—not when you go shopping for a book deal" (77). If an author wants to sign with an agent or sign with a publisher, she must bring her media platform to the table, doing everything in her power to ensure her viability as a public figure as well as a capable writer.

The author's platform, according to *WM*'s Jeff Yeager, is "a writer's capacity to help promote and market his own work [and, presumably, himself] to potential readers. It's a writer's ability to attract a fan base of his own, outside of the promotional efforts of his publisher. It's a writer's ability to get his message out to the world." Yeager includes a 10-point checklist for developing a platform, suggesting authors rely heavily on social media (including some now-defunct platforms) for both presence and reach:

> 1. Create your own website, keep it current with a blog and other updated content, and make it interactive with forums, contests, surveys, newsletters, a guestbook, etc. […]
>
> 4. Position yourself as *the* go-to source for information regarding your area of expertise by joining related professional organizations, earning certifications, and registering with online and print directories like LinkedIn.com and *Who's Who*, as well as social networking sites like FaceBook *(sic)* and MySpace. […]
>
> 6. Hold a publicity event—or, dare I say a publicity stunt or gimmick? Challenge your church group to see how much weight they can lose by following the instructions in the diet book you're writing, or hype the mystery novel you're writing by hiding clues around town to the location of the buried treasure—the real treasure might be the media exposure you generate. […]
>
> 9. Post your own book trailers and other video content on YouTube, create your own podcasts, or publish your own ezine—even amateurish efforts can catch fire.

As is evident from this selection of sagely device, the development of an author platform has been much aided by social media. Would-be authors now have the tools for marketing and promotion available at their keyboards, as well as the means for disseminating their own work and interacting with their audience. "Pre-Internet, writers had to rely on traditional print and broadcast media, as well as public appearances and other in-person networking to gain visibility and establish credibility," *Writer's Market* explains. "Clearly a strong presence on the Internet can not only be a major plank in an author's platform, but it's also a logical place for many writers to begin building their platforms" (74). This trend toward social-platforming has only grown more prevalent with the expansion of social media outlets in both number and influence. The 2012 edition included a section on "Promoting Your Work," with agents, editors, and bestselling writers dispensing with advice on creating book trailers, Tweeting effectively, and the relative merits of Facebook vs. LinkedIn for self-promotion. By 2013, three short years after platforms were included in *WM*, readers who had mastered the basics were invited to graduate to "Author Platform 2.0." "You've been through the drill already," Jane Friedman writes, Friedman suggests that authors "optimize" their web presence, make relationships matter, and "diversify [their] content." Friedman's language is particularly telling, mirroring the neoliberal jargon that has been recently adopted by publishers—optimization, diversification, and in increased emphasis on interpersonal measurement (relationships "mattering"). Authors are made to adopt or adapt to such a neoliberal logic as a necessary precondition for publication—not only as they write (as I demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2) but if they want to continue to write.

Internet platform-building is not restricted to potential, new, or especially young authors—even established writers are building their platforms via social media. Indeed, *Writer's Market* reminds readers that "Platform building is a career-long activity. It doesn't stop once your website goes live, or after you land a book deal. In fact, your continued career growth depends on extending your reach and uncovering new opportunities" (175). A quick perusal of Twitter will reveal no shortage of established writers who have turned to social media as a way of promoting their work, furthering their brand, and interacting with their audience. William Gibson has been known to interact with scholars discussing his work (at MLA, no less) via his Twitter account, @GreatDismal;[75] meanwhile, JK Rowling releases post-publication information about her *Harry Potter* universe to fans online in small doses; Joyce Carol Oates has become a somewhat notorious Twitter troll; and Jennifer Egan and Teju Cole have both experimented with Twitter as an electronic novel delivery system. That these well established authors have turned to social media as a mode of platform development should certainly suggest the prevalence of the phenomenon for younger writers, particularly those without the built-in network of the MFA program (likely closer to *Writer's Market*'s target audience). An all-encompassing and ongoing career expectation, the writer's platform becomes a way of describing the writer's life. "Everything you write, every media appearance you make, every book talk you give, opens a new avenue for extending and strengthening your platform" (Yeager, 77). It is easy to see how an aspiring author could be easily overwhelmed by the demands of developing a platform in addition to writing a novel—how and why Tom McCarthy would be particularly

[75] For more on Gibson's exchange with the MLA Panel on his works, see Kirschenbaum, "What is an @uthor?" *Los Angeles Review of* Books. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/uthor/

curmudgeonly about the expectations for marketing placed on him and his cohort. The 2016 edition of *WM* responds to this apparently widely felt frustration by providing essays that help writers to "Balance Your Writing and Your Platform in 8 Simple Steps."

The impetus for the author platform should be clear, given the risks that agents must take and editors must assume. Agents and Editors that I interviewed in chapters 1 and 2 similarly attest to the significance of the author's platform when pitching and acquiring titles. "There's no getting around the fact that it's important. If a person has 100k Twitter followers, that's a piece of information that goes into your head. And contributes to the calculus," one editor told me, regarding the author platform and the size of the advance. Likewise, one editor reported that an author's platform has the potential to dramatically change the process of acquisition: "If you've gotten a book that's moving really fast because the writer is well-known or they have a platform, or whatever it is, if it's moving very fast, you can jump straight to the editor-in-chief," skipping the Acquisition Meeting altogether in order to secure a large advance. Anticipating these attitudes, on agent told me that she thinks regularly about an author's potential platform when pitching: "Could this author get on a talk show and talk about these things?," she asks herself when representing a title. A platform is persuasive, among other reasons, because it is a built-in audience—a near guarantee about the number of books that will sell and the profit a book may turn. The author platform is a necessary to persuade publishers that a new author will, in fact, earn out their advance.

In what follows, I read Tom McCarthy's paraliterary writing and performances as a part of an author platform, arguing that his articles, interviews, and INS stunts amount to a comprehensive promotional strategy, developing the McCarthy brand. To that end, I read

something *other than* McCarthy's novels—interviews, personal essays, and other paratextual writing—to show how McCarthy and authors like him operate within the literary marketplace.[76] In particular, I show how McCarthy uses essays in popular literary and cultural criticism to build his brand, shape readerly reception of his novels, and position himself (and his novels) in opposition to the dominant mode of the Big Five—that is, upmarket literary fiction. My concern is not to analyze McCarthy's platform as a sort of hagiography, or to read his novels autobiographically, but as a paratext that shapes the reception of McCarthy's work in a broader literary marketplace; that is to say, I take McCarthy's public works, even those which appear to be the most classically "autobiographical" as complementary fictional performances within McCarthy's body of work, similarly structured according to—and in response to—the logic of the field.

III. McCarthy's Platform

When Tom McCarthy's *C* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2010, Ladbrokes Online Betting faced a serious dilemma. Unwilling to entertain the idea that the unprecedented flurry of betting on McCarthy might be genuine, Ladbrokes suspended the betting altogether, their spokesman David Williams claiming, "It wouldn't be so surprising if there were a Rushdie in the race, but with respect, in this case it was borderline inexplicable and we decided to pull the plug" (Page). On the one hand, McCarthy does seem an odd choice for the Man Booker. His avant-garde style and highbrow theorizing have

[76] The paratext, famously enumerated by Gerard Genette, is a zone somewhere both inside and outside the traditional text, a zone of "transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, and influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (2).

earned him the reputation of "the most galling interviewee in Britain," and the "scourge of contemporary aesthetic values" (Robson; Armesto). McCarthy cuts a brainy figure, between his International Necronautical Society that takes as its mandate to "bring death out into the world… [to] chart all its forms and media… to tap into its frequencies — by radio, the internet and all sites where its processes and avatars are active," and his insistence that contemporary literature "deal with the legacy of modernism."[77] McCarthy—or perhaps a McCarthy lookalike, one can never be sure—participates in academic conferences, speaking directly with literary critics about his work. McCarthy's brand is academic, distinct from the lifestyle gurus-turned-writers that tend to be associated with authorial platforms. Even still, his success with bookies shouldn't be *that* surprising. Ladbrokes skepticism notwithstanding, McCarthy is keenly aware of his perception in the public eye, as his various interviews and essays suggest, and the way that this platform shapes his novels' reception (and, likely, sales figures). Leo Robson of *The New Statesmen* has accused McCarthy of "indulg[ing] an appetite for self-promotion that makes Norman Mailer look like Thomas Pynchon."[78] Indeed, McCarthy skillfully commands public attention and generates excitement for his work through carefully timed essays, talks and interviews, and the occasional media stunt.

Much of McCarthy's early notoriety came from the INS, whose performances are a key component of McCarthy's platform. Modeled on the most notorious groups of the historical avant-garde, the Futurists and the Surrealists, the INS has hacked BBC radio

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[77]Purdon, James. "Tom McCarthy: 'To ignore the avant-garde is akin to ignoring Darwin.'" *The Guardian*. 31 July 2010. Accessed February 4 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon

[78] Robson, Leo. "C." http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/08/mccarthy-novel-serge-smith. 13 August 2010. Accessed 4 February 2016.

frequencies, inducted and purged new members regularly, sponsored their own "propaganda" wing, and exhibited at the Tate Modern. McCarthy does not have a personal Twitter account, but the INS does; they have been tweeting *Moby Dick*, 140 characters at a time, since September, 2009. In addition to the antics of the INS, McCarthy's platform is bolstered by his nonfiction writing, appearing in major outlets. Review essays bearing his byline are often published in the *London Review of Books*, long review essays that place novels like Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Running Away* in dialogue with the history of the nouveau roman, for instance, or discussing *The Raw Shark Texts* in light of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* and *Atrocity Exhibition*. When he isn't reviewing, McCarthy writes essays discussing issues in contemporary arts and letters—Friedrich Kittler's death, Gerhard Richter's paintings. These essays are assiduously timed, often coinciding directly with the release of a novel (sometimes within a span of days), suggesting an exercise less of intellect than of platform development.

McCarthy's essays are his most overt attempt to interact with the information cascade surrounding his novels, often explicating his otherwise dense and difficult novels. McCarthy uses his platform of essays to both shape the information cascade around his novels and to discipline readers in his particular vein of literary history. These paraliterary performances allow McCarthy to craft a reader's reception of his work in advance, providing a template for how to read and understand the new novel. This strategy was put to great effect in the essays published around the release of *C,* McCarthy's first novel to be nominated for a major literary award. The *C* essay suite establishes a literary-historical

precedent for McCarthy's novels, a "greatest hits" of the early 20th-century avant-garde.[79] Set in England, following a young boy through his life in the English countryside, through World War I, through the Bloomsbury salons before culminating in 1922, *C* fictionalizes a number of significant events in the history of modernist art and literature, such as F.T. Marinetti's famous car crash that led to his penning of *The First Manifesto of Futurism,* all of which create a genealogy of modernism and technological mediation. This highly citational novel is filled with references to technological and literary history—references that might easily be missed by the average pleasure reader. And so, just four days prior to *C*'s release, McCarthy published an essay in *The Guardian* reviewing Gabriel Josipovici's *Whatever Happened to Modernism?* McCarthy is quick to show off his scholarly chops, demonstrating that he has more than simply a passing interest in literary history: "That modernism represented one of the great seismic shifts in the history of western literature wouldn't be disputed by any literature professors who know their onions. "[80] In a cursory lit review, McCarthy is out to prove that he knows *his* onions: he is a credible source to comment on Josipovici's scholarship in this exercise of popular literary criticism. Moreover, McCarthy analyzes Josipovici's book through the lens of the aesthetic and political sensibilities that underpin *C*; by the end of the essay, McCarthy has turned from book reviewing to book promoting. By the time that readers got their hands on a hard copy of *C*, they would have had access to McCarthy's blueprint for the book, his ideas about technology and art, and the

[79] Amanda Claybaugh rightly notes the slippage in McCarthy's genealogy of the "radical" avant-garde: "This conflation of avant-garde theorists with writers who are canonically modernist, not avant-garde, into a single "radical" tradition is typical of McCarthy's critical writings." Claybaugh, Amanda. 2011. "McC (review of Tom McCarthy)." *n+1*, 11. For the purposes of this essay, I adopt McCarthy's over-general definition.

[80] In the way of establishing his reputation as a scholarly voice, McCarthy has also provided critical introductions to several texts, such as his essay on Alain Robbe-Grillet, included in the preface of Richard Howard's recent translation of *Jealousy*.

novel's historical context. A second essay, "Technology and the novel, from Blake to Ballard" (published two days after *C*'s release) provided readers a basic knowledge of how *C* participates in a grand history of literature. This strategy was evidently effective, for it was also employed in anticipation of the publication of McCarthy's most recent novel, *Satin Island*. While his essays are, ostensibly, exercises in popular literary criticism, it is hard to ignore the publication dates. The strategy behind this information cascade is one of misdirection: so long as McCarthy writes about literary history and not himself, he can dodge the appearance of *self*-promotion, paradoxically cultivating a reputation as one who is interested not in personal acclaim, but in the ideas that motivate his work. These essays are, in fact, crucial for explicating a central component of McCarthy's platform: a rejection of the notion of authorial self-promotion by way of an embrace of the historic avant-garde.[81]

McCarthy is not unique in rejecting overt self-promotion as a part of his author platform. Bourdieu has famously argued that we understand the public habitus of authorship as an "interest in disinterestedness," in which artists operate successfully in the field of cultural production by appearing disinterested in their financial or symbolic success, thereby asserting the autonomy of the field (Bourdieu, "Field" 40). Evan Brier has identified this paradox of disinterestedness as a "disavowal," in which "The novelist's role as promoter, his or her participation in the project of articulating the specific cultural value of the novel in the age of mass culture," is often achieved through, "announcing his or her aloneness" (15). This interest in disinterestedness—or, to borrow James English's phrase,

[81] McCarthy is chief among the "metamodernists," that David James and Urmilla Seshagiri identify as revitalizing an interest in modernism in contemporary literature and challenging the understanding of modernism for critics.

"amused complicity"—is encapsulated in McCarthy's contribution to the somewhat gossipy "My Desktop" series published in *The Guardian* in 2011, in which "writers show us around their working lives by revealing what's on their computer desktops."[82] McCarthy's desktop is clear of clutter, with two folders open and unobstructed (figure 10). A folder entitled "Columbia talk," reveals an image from Jon Cocteau's *Orpheé*. "Satin Island"—a folder named for the novel then in progress—contains such cryptic subfolders as "Parachute Stuff," but also "Agamben" and "Capone" and "Don DeLillo." While other authors in the series discuss their writing habits, their families and friends, and what they like to do in their daily lives—all topics that make them seem personable and approachable—McCarthy instead discusses his upcoming project and how it relates to the thematic concerns of *C*: technology and the body, modernism and realism, critical theory and the avant-garde.

[82] This series continued through June, 2013, and also featured Julie Myerson, Steven Hall, Louise Doughty, Joanne Harris, Jon McGregor, David Vann, Jenn Ashworth, Marie Phillips, George Saunders, AL Kennedy, Evie Wyld, TC Boyle, David Bezmozgis, Jed Mercurio, Nikesh Shukla, and Craig Taylor.

Figure 9: Tom McCarthy's desktop.

The timestamp reads “Wed 21:43” for a piece published by *The Guardian* on Thursday, “11.39,” giving the impression that this article and image were hastily thrown together. The flippancy of the timestamp and in-progress look to the Desktop enhance the sense of disinterestedness; however, the careful correspondence to the article’s copy—certainly one of the first public references to *Satin Island,* then still four years in the making—belies a meticulous writer attentive to media relations, despite his affectations to the contrary. This seeming indifference to publicity is an essential strategy in the economy of prestige: by appearing both genuine and disinterested, not overtly publicity-oriented, McCarthy is able to distance himself from the act of promotion, suggest that he remains outside and above, such industry-motivated tactics.

But this position is a precarious one, difficult to maintain. The greater his commercial success and visibility in the public eye, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the posture of disinterestedness. The more prestige McCarthy accrues, the more

complicit he appears. Indeed, it is impossible to argue that McCarthy appears *disinterested* in public acclaim or symbolic prestige judging by the timing of his essays; rather, he revises the Bourdieusian strategy by directing his disinterest at the very institutions that support him. Perhaps McCarthy's public performance resembles less Bourdieu's disinterestedness than what James English's has called an amused complicity, "a strategy that enables one to enjoy both the rewards of the game and the rewards due to those who are seen as standing above the game" (215). Even still, unlike the rhetorical structures that English identifies in the economy of prestige, which do not allow for outright rejection, McCarthy has made his clear antipathy for the industry plain through his invocation of the historic avant-garde.

McCarthy's affinity toward the avant-garde—and its rejection of market imperatives and bourgeois audiences—has been firmly established as a part of his origin story. His early difficulty in getting published is well-known; Zadie Smith contributed to the popularization of McCarthy's origin story in her influential essay, "Two Paths for the Novel,"—an essay that played no small part in McCarthy's quick accumulation of cultural capital. McCarthy's first novel, *Remainder*, was rejected by major publishing houses until finding a home with Metronome Press—an art press, he insists, not a publishing house. In a 2011 interview with Fred Fernandez Amesto in *The White Review*, McCarthy tells the story of *Remainder*'s publication as a sort of neo-modernist experiment, in which Metronome adopted the publishing practices of Olympia and Grove Press from midcentury.

> The guy who owned Olympia, Maurice Girodias…was making money from porn and at the same time publishing cutting-edge literature at a loss. So he tried to bring his audience together by making pullouts that had porn on one side and extracts from the novels on the other. On one side you'd have a

> naked girl up a ladder, and on the other side you'd have *Molloy***.** Now, you read Beckett or Nabokov in austere critical editions with an introduction and all that stuff, but that was the original context.

After being rejected by mainstream publishing houses, *Remainder,* too, was published alongside soft-core pornography as a part of Metronome's throwback project, with McCarthy joining figures like Burroughs and Nabokov and Beckett and "all these writers who no other publisher would touch." McCarthy's literary heroes were also outsiders, publishing with minor art houses like New Directions and Grove Press rather than with Knopf, Scribner's, or Random House. Certainly, there is worse company to keep.

Even as he (supposedly) eschews publicity and denounces the corporate practices of the publishing industry to dodge the appearance of complicity, McCarthy aligns his ideas with those of modernist writers in order to legitimate his critiques. He compares his writing of *Remainder* to Joyce's writing of *Ulysses*: both he and Joyce meticulously measured and charted the city, from the number of potholes on a street to the duration of a letter's float down the Liffey (Armesto). He has written an essay riffing on T.S. Eliot called "Transmission and the Individual Remix." McCarthy builds his platform around the avant-garde in order to ignite a protest of the procedures of the publishing industry. McCarthy's interest in the avant-garde, known for its hostility toward bourgeois audiences, becomes a sort of anti-platform, at once complying with and subverting industry expectations.

McCarthy's platform thus stages a protest about corporate control over aesthetic practice in the publishing industry. The INS Purge is once again instructive: the writers purged by the INS were cast-out because they wrote "to order," succumbing to the demands of the corporate firms with which they published. At the corporate presses,

"Editors… have to run novels' synopses past reader focus groups before being allowed to publish them." (McCarthy, "What Ever Happened to Modernism?"). Incidentally, McCarthy is not wrong. As I have shown, publishing conglomerates *do* rely on market research (comps) in their acquisition board meetings, resulting in a condensation of literary style. While publishing insiders refer to this new stylistic category as "upmarket literary fiction," McCarthy disparagingly denounces these templates as "official fiction," that is, a "naïve escapist fantasy…of individual self-expression, or the transcendent human spirit, or art-as-redemption." Deeply conservative, official fiction "has retreated into comforting nostalgia about kings and queens, or supposed tales of the contemporary rendered in an equally nostalgic mode" ("The death of writing"). *Remainder* includes no such redemption or nostalgia: after experiencing blunt trauma to the head, the narrator (who remains nameless) spends his fortune replaying elaborate, but altogether commonplace, events in his daily life; there is only matter. To publish with an independent house rather than an imprint of an international multimedia conglomerate allowed McCarthy to maintain his artistic and aesthetic autonomy, as he tells it, in a tale not dissimilar from Ben Lerner's.

Moreover, McCarthy's platform, relying on a rejection of personal acclaim in favor of an embrace of the modernist avant-garde, poses an aesthetic and political challenge to the values currently espoused by the publishing industry, evidenced by middlebrow upmarket literary fiction. If the industry is so distasteful, it is not exclusively due to commercial values ("writers have been dependent on some kind of marketplace since time immemorial," McCarthy admits), but because of its production of aesthetic values. The initial INS purges were undertaken not because INS writers published with major imprints, but because aesthetic and creative choices were ceded over to "corporate market research" that shaped

the writing "to order." The relationship between institution and literary production is undeniable, and responsible for the sort of "middle-brow aesthetics" that McCarthy rejects time and again in his work.

IV. Modernism and the McCarthy Brand

To read through McCarthy's novels is to encounter a host of institutions in which individuals are as uncomfortable as McCarthy appears in his Man Booker promotional photos. Read against the backdrop of McCarthy's platform, these novels constitute a holistic critique of the category of the upmarket, institutionally imposed aesthetics, and the array of responses (and responsibilities) available to the artist in the corporate world. If McCarthy's platform is critical of the industry that supports him, then his novels are doubly so. McCarthy's novel *C* was the first to win him international acclaim, including his nomination for major literary awards. When written about, *C* is usually hailed for its fascinating engagement with modernism, its preoccupations with technology, and theories of the post-human.[83] As I have shown, McCarthy's attendance to modernist literary history should be understood as a shorthand critique of the publishing industry; *C* is no different. *C* fictionalizes key elements of McCarthy's brand of "navigating [modernism's] wreckage."

C investigates the position of and potential for experimentation within conservative economic and cultural institutions through the life of one Serge Carrefax. Serge is ill at ease in the many institutions he finds himself—the school, the hospital, the military, the government. Serge Carrefax resembles a young Stephen Dedalus. As an artist and author-figure, Serge's relationship to the school as a training institution is particularly significant

[83] In particular, see Nieland, "Dirty Modernism", Lea, "The Anxieties of Authenticity in Post-2000 British Fiction," and James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism."

in the development of his aesthetic sensibilities; though Serge experiences very little in the way of personal development, his movement through institutions such as the school marks the major phases of the novel: Serge grew up at a school for the hearing impaired and returns from the military to attend architecture school; in between, he gets a crash course in how one must behave at a hospital or in the army. The pattern is the same: Serge is trained and he rejects his training, either by leaving or through the adoption of alternative behaviors.

In taking the school as emblematic of cultural institutions, I mean to emphasize not the specific curricula, but rather the "culture of the school," to borrow Langdon Hammer's phrase, or "the school of life," to borrow Amy Hungerford's: that is, the school as a training ground, whose "encouragement or perceived suppression of creativity" relate directly to the ways in which schools "form writers and readers in—and for—the contemporary literary marketplace" (649), or for a professional class more broadly.[84] McCarthy, too, has drawn comparisons between the school and industry, arguing, "Conversely, businesses… have taken over the universities' former role as society's prime sites of knowledge generation" (McCarthy, "The death of writing"). Seemingly building on the arguments that

[84] In capitalizing on the role of the school as a metaphor, I am indebted to McGurl's *The Program Era*; more broadly, however, this argument is situated amongst those that McGurl's has inspired, which further extend the institutional reach of the "culture of the school." *The Program Era* is not the only book of its kind to locate such power in the school. Similarly, I rely on the central tenets of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, which locates the project of canon creation in the school, extending Bourdieu's arguments about education, access, and taste to the American academy. Amy Hungerford shows how institutions such as McSweeney's represents a sort of "school of life" (649). Langdon Hammer's "Plath's Lives: Poetry, Professionalism, and the Culture of the School," is exceptionally useful in thinking about the school's production of professionalism. The school is also, of course, central to Bourdieu's sociology of taste and culture, as the central institution in producing not only social distinction and in the variable that often distinguishes between social classes (and their subsequent differences in cultural taste).

Mark McGurl has made in *The Program Era,* in which McGurl traces postwar American literary style back to the classrooms of MFA programs, McCarthy extends his critique of the publishing industry's production of uniform aesthetics to the school, as well, reciting the familiar indictment against MFA programs and the "doctrines of authenticity peddled by creative writing classes the world over." It is no great stretch to draw connections between the school and the marketplace in Serge's case, as he is enrolled in a professional training program that will eventually certify his entrance into a professional field, as much aesthetic as technical; credentialed as a skilled architect, Serge will be authorized to pursue employment upon graduation—though, as we will see, such an overly-determined process does not suit him.

In his capacity as both artist and student, Serge's relationship with this program is uneasy. He finds the language of the classroom too prescriptive, the behavior of the other students too off-putting. The school is presented as crusty and conservative: professors quickly condense the history of architecture to "the influence of ancient Greece on the architecture of the Roman, mediaeval and—to cut a long list short—all subsequent periods" (250). Students learn the appropriate decorum for architectural success and professionalism, each trying to outdo the other in imagination, vision, and the lyrical application of architectural principles. "This sausage is like a fluteless column," one student proclaims over lunch. And, "Then my poached egg is a gilded saucer dome, rendered in bird's-eye perspective." Serge's less-than-inspired contribution (his meager lunch composed of just bread and butter): "A burial mound, with a gravestone on the side" (251). While this presages Serge's eventual death in an Egyptian crypt, it also demonstrates Serge's unwillingness to shape himself into a model pupil. Rather than occupy the habitus

of a budding architect, Serge finds his way to Bloomsbury coffee shops, scores cocaine off a chorus girl, and disrupts spiritualist séances.

More than a reaction to the program's niceties, Serge finds himself at odds with tutors and administrators over the nature of artistic representation. Serge's faculty are dismayed that all of his drawings are in "plan view"—that is, aerial plans without depth or detail, no attempt at three-dimensionality or perspective; Serge is clearly out of step with the program: "As you're no doubt aware, the syllabus for the first year requires you to become proficient in not only plan but also section, elevation and perspective." Plan view is his "preferred projection," because he finds perspective difficult. It is clear, however, that this is not a matter of skill on Serge's part, but a matter of perception, marking Serge as different from those around him. With his childhood tutor, Serge's "perceptual apparatuses refuse point-blank to be twisted into the requisite configuration. He sees things flat; he paints things flat" (48). While his sister Sophie painted plants and insects with photographic precision, Serge only painted maps. He attempts to explain to his instructors, "It just seems odd to draw things out into relief when they're—" but they will hear none of it. While the school privileges depth perception and perspectival realism, Serge is insistent on representational flatness. His unwillingness to adjust the ways in which he draws renders him unfit for the field of professional architecture. Serge's embrace of modernist perspective, ultimately, alienates him from the school's prescriptive conservatism, and he must seek his fortunes elsewhere. The culture of the school in *C* extends McCarthy's critiques about the publishing industry in its production and dissemination of cultural capital, its gatekeeping, and its insistence that students and writers adopt particular aesthetic programs in order to be validated in their profession.

This episode recalls an earlier moment in the novel; not in school, but in the military, Serge encounters a painter hired by the government to develop a method to camouflage planes. The artist Carlisle has "devis[ed] a whole system based on Goethe's theory of colours and appl[ied] it to machines, painting blue, violet and yellow stripes across their wings and fuselage—before discovering that these only camouflaged the planes when seen against the ground, an asset deemed of such limited value that it was scrapped after only two machines had been thus decorated" (183) in accordance with his classical education at Slade. Carlisle was given the post of War Artist rather than being recalled. But Carlisle is dismayed to find that the technical rules of landscape painting simply do not apply. He complains to Serge (already a few drinks in),

> It's all wrong, aesthetically speaking: all the depth and texture of a summer countryside steamrollered into a flat page…The aircraft shell burst lasts a second—at its peak, I mean, the explosion itself, the bit I should be painting...How am I meant to paint time? How am I meant to paint anything? The stuff won't stay still to be painted! Ground won't stay still, air won't stay still, nothing bloody stays still. (184)

Serge attempts to argue with Carlisle, that perhaps this "mess" is precisely the quality that he should be painting in his capacity as War Artist. But this will not do, either aesthetically or militarily, Carlisle tells Serge, because "Headquarters are complaining that my images aren't photographic enough." (185). Serge persists—"Why not just paint it as you see it?"— struggling against the force of this institutionally prescribed mode of vision and aesthetic experience, with the familiar debates of modern art as the engine powering this dialogue. Modernist sensory perception and an avant-garde approach to realism—as

novel and revolutionary approaches in 1922—stand outside of the sanctions of two of *C*'s primary institutions, the school and the military; the figures that reside in them must, as Carlisle, struggle to acquiesce or, like Serge, drop out altogether. Carlisle understands the impossibility of his task as War Artist; though he still holds to the validity of his classical training in realist painting, he does acknowledge that his present situation—flying at breakneck speed with no stable horizon over utter chaos—is simply incompatible with the doctrines of landscape painting he learned at Slade, despite military demands to the contrary. Yet, the institution reproduces its ideology (via painting or architecture) as a means of authorizing its students' entrée into professional life, mirroring the publishing house as gatekeeping institutions of professionalization and in the production of aesthetic and political ideology.

The echoes to McCarthy's arguments about the marketplace need little elaboration. Just as McCarthy complains of the homogenized middlebrow aesthetic dominating contemporary fiction, so too do Serge and Carlisle confront the aesthetic demands of their training, however variously. Notably, it is not simply the institutional influence that McCarthy is satirizing, but the particular emphasis on *realism* encapsulated by these authorities, echoing McCarthy's paratextual protestations about the programmatic nature of "realism" in upmarket literary fiction. Modernist, experimental perspective is shut out of institutions in favor of their respective, conservative aesthetic prescriptions. It is not my intention to create a simplistic division between "realism" and "modernism," as though high modernist literature were not also concerned with realism and perception. But I do mean to show that reading *C* in concert with McCarthy's author platform further suggests

that the modernist brand for which McCarthy is consistently associated and acclaimed has become a vehicle for industrial critique.

Contemporary writers, McCarthy argues, espousing a "naïve and uncritical realism dominating contemporary middlebrow fiction, and the doctrine of authenticity peddled by creative writing classes the world over," have yet to understand the futility and impossibility of their own projects. This "real" literature is at once a "naïve escapist fantasy… of individual self-expression, or the transcendent human spirit, or art-as-redemption," while also being set against the avant-garde, which isn't "real." By contrast, McCarthy argues—like Serge—that the task is to write it like you see it, and that, in so doing, reality might be "brought forth or produced." In this way, Amanda Claybaugh has argued that McCarthy's novels are at their "best, surprisingly enough, when most realist" (173). McCarthy's indirect rejoinder is to contest the nature of "realism," and the role of the avant-garde in producing a conception of the "real": "It turns out that the 20th-century avant-garde often paints a far more *realistic* picture than 19th-century realists ever did. But it's also the case that realism's founders—if not their descendants—fully appreciate the scaffolding of artifice holding their carefully wrought edifices up, and take delight, from time to time, in shoving poles and ladders through the parlour windows." The problem, it would seem, is not the claims of any sort of aesthetic realism, but the ignorance of the scaffolding rather as opposed to the self-conscious acknowledgment that "reality" is created in and through a novel: that is, not self-evidently awaiting a brilliant novelist to finally give voice to a universal, authentic Reality.

McCarthy's stand against realism is somewhat vexed. Claybaugh has noted that McCarthy's attack on realist aesthetics, prior to *C*, seemed largely ascribed to him thanks to

Zadie Smith's reading of *Remainder*. In his critical work surrounding *C*, it appeared that McCarthy was simply accepting that mantle, graduating from the playfulness of the INS to inject his information cascade with a more "advanced" or intellectual flavor. When, in the past, McCarthy seemed perfectly content to ignore the "contemporary middlebrow fiction," he now rails against the dominant trends in publishing, beyond the role of the conglomerate publisher, considering much more explicitly how authors are to function within the new corporate order. As I discussed in chapter 2, upmarket literary fiction—or, as McCarthy dismissively calls it, "Oprah literature"—dominates the contemporary marketplace because *it sells*. It is an easier pitch for agents, its comps are more readily apparent, a platform can be built around it with greater ease. The contemporary literary marketplace is dominated by such "photorealist" fiction, with contemporary authors claiming the authority of realism and authenticity—often, explicitly over and against the tradition that McCarthy identifies as the "radical avant-garde" and embraces as a part of his platform. The sort of perspective that Serge embraces, and would call "realist", has no place in an ideologically conservative, risk-proof publishing industry.

V. Field Notes from the Corporation

I have shown how McCarthy has configured his brand around a rejection of the publishing industry under media conglomerates, via his invocation of literary modernism and the historic avant-garde. I have also read *C* in light of that program, showing how McCarthy's rejection of the international media conglomerates is tantamount to a rejection of prescriptive aesthetic programs—call it middlebrow realism (like McCarthy), lyrical realism (like Zadie Smith), or upmarket literary fiction (like my agent and editor

participants). What path remains, then, for the author? If, as I have argued, the author in the contemporary marketplace must contend with synergy, bottom lines, and bestseller codes—all while simultaneously marketing his or her own books through Instagram and Twitter accounts—is there a way forward for experimental fiction in the mainstream market? In the remainder of this essay, I turn to the alternative that McCarthy advances in *Satin Island*, allegorizing his own platforming strategy: undermining the industry even while operating successfully within it.

If Serge has rejected and been rejected by the school for his refusal to adopt institutional aesthetic values, then U. is his next iteration, abandoning such traditional cultural institutions (the academy) entirely in favor of a Googlesque corporation in *Satin Island*. More deliberately than *C, Satin Island* gestures towards the condition of its own production, allegorizing the role of the would-be avant-gardist in the world of the international conglomerate. In *Satin Island,* McCarthy shows us an author, cheekily named U., attempting to work within—and subtly disrupt—the world of corporate publishing. Through reflections on his own position taking, U. works to turn the corporation against itself, even while working within its auspices to pursue his own (suspiciously INS-like) research agenda. Employing his trademark platform strategy, McCarthy's essays provide us a template for reading his novel, delivering the punch line before telling the joke. "If James Joyce were alive today he'd be working for Google," proclaimed an essay published in *The Guardian* just three days prior to *Satin Island*'s release. McCarthy would have us believe that U.'s path is increasingly common, a product of the media conglomerate's antipathy for innovative writing; authors who do not remake themselves according to industry standards leave altogether and go elsewhere—namely, to Silicon Valley. In his essay, "The

death of writing," McCarthy describes James Joyce, the Corporate Anthropologist, developing a theory of writing that locates creative agency in paraliterary institutions such as the Corporation in which U. works. The Corporation allows, even encourages, the sort of avant-garde experimental realism that McCarthy espouses and that has been rejected by the mainstream industry; the avant-garde tradition that McCarthy admires is "flourishing" in corporate settings, having been expelled from literary ones. As for James Joyce's relocation from Dublin to Silicon Valley, McCarthy writes,

> [The] company, in its most cutting-edge incarnation, has become the arena in which narratives and fictions, metaphors and metonymies, and symbol networks at their most dynamic and incisive are being worked through and transformed. While "official" fiction has retreated into comforting nostalgia about kings and queens, or supposed tales of the contemporary rendered in an equally nostalgic mode of unexamined realism, it is funky architecture firms, digital media companies and brand consultancies that have assumed the mantle of the cultural avant-garde. It is they who, now, seem to be performing the writers' essential task of working through the fragmentations of old orders of experience and representation, and coming up with radical new forms to chart and manage new, emergent ones.

While the company may seem like a refuge for writers like U. who are committed to an analysis and description of culture ("the mess," as Serge might say), what is crucial about McCarthy's formulation is that the company is a necessary refuge because publishing has closed its doors to those who do not meet its narrow prescriptions. Economies have been inverted, with the corporate publishing industry adopting business practices that many

cutting-edge corporations find outdated as they pursue the project of cultural production. (Whether the tech companies that McCarthy describes agree with such an assessment is another matter entirely.)

This is not to say, however, that McCarthy blindly endorses the corporate practices of the *other* Big Five—Google, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon—or that U. is particularly comfortable operating in these spheres. The solution is not to pack up the Moleskine notebook and head for a cubicle, but to find an alternative mode of authorship within such a prescriptive setting. More than praising the corporation, McCarthy is attacking an industry that is willing to sacrifice experimentation—aesthetic and cultural value—in favor of surefire commercial success ("comforting nostalgia about kings and queens or supposed tales of the contemporary rendered in an equally nostalgic mode of unexamined realism"). Again, McCarthy turns to Joyce, and the invocation is instructive. While, as McCarthy notes, "No publisher would ever touch Joyce" at the beginning of his career, Joyce was also a master manipulator of the press, leaking the chapter titles for *Ulysses* (often through scholars and his publisher Sylvia Beach), and making the connection to *The Odyssey* crystal clear, a process that Lawrence Rainey has argued, "signaled the decisive entry of modernism into the public sphere via an identifiable process of commodification" (44). While Joyce may represent a high-water mark of modernist experimentation, he also stands in as a model of aesthetic commitment *and* exploitation of the literary industry of his day, using commodification of *Ulysses* to his decided advantage. The likenesses in these performances of authorship is striking: like Joyce and like McCarthy, U. games the system: his likeness to Joyce is not solely in the totality he attempts to capture in his work, but is also located in his skillful manipulation of the Corporation to satisfy his

own ends. Taken together, McCarthy's essays and novels present a paradoxical template for an authorial platform of resistance to the corporate world. *Satin Island* is thus the *piece de resistance* to McCarthy's platform.

With this hyperbolic essay as a backdrop, McCarthy introduces us to U., one such Joycean figure in *Satin Island*, working in a corporation that deliberately confuses the ethos of a Silicon Valley tech corporation with the function of the international publishing conglomerates. Not unlike Serge, U. is the artist-author figure of a novel that, in many ways, appears to be about something *other* than artists and authors. Even still, U. describes his Company in a decidedly literary fashion. Having given up on academic research and publishing, U. spends his days compiling dossiers (that bear an uncanny resemblance, in both form and content, to those compiled by the INS) in order to write The Great Report, the report that will sum up Contemporary Culture. While the document remains unwritten as the novel closes, U. spends his time researching parachutist suicide pacts, oil spills, buffering, Levi's jeans, and Staten Island, all of which, it turns out, are intimately connected. "We dealt… in narratives" (15), he is fond of saying of his employer. U.'s relationship to, and reflections on, authorship within the corporate megalith are much more explicit than Serge's, further sharpening *Satin Island*'s allegorical edge. U.'s position as an anthropologist provides McCarthy a suitable vehicle through which to critique the culture of the institution of publishing. As a somewhat nontraditional anthropologist, U.'s published doctoral thesis won him a small bit of acclaim—"the odd public reading, the odd newspaper review" (26)—for his forward-thinking anthropological work (U. is known for his clever asides and digressions). Through these digressions, McCarthy reflects on the sorts of platforming that he regularly undertakes via U.'s position-taking in his own field. Discussing his research

into London's underground club scene, U. writes about "the question of the anthropologist's *persona*." U. muses,

> Since the necessary act of approaching the familiar as a stranger, of behaving—even to yourself—as if you didn't understand the situations that in fact you do, is an obvious contrivance; and since, conversely, *pretending* to understand them, at a profound, unmediated level, to think and believe and desire certain premises, propositions, objects and outcomes, for the purpose of attaining better access to the subculture you're infiltrating, is equally contrived; or, to flip it back the other way again, to *actually* think and believe and desire these, but to be forced nonetheless, in your role as anthropologist, to *pretend* you're being and doing what you really *are* being and doing—in brief, since all this shit entails a constant shifting of identities, a blurring of positions and perspectives, you end up lost in a kaleidoscope of masquerades, roles, general make-believe. (25-26, emphasis in original).

Though the "field" for U. is an anthropological field (as opposed to "home"), his descriptions of authorial artifice could easily describe the role of disinterestedness in the act of position-taking in a Bourdieusian sense, challenging the notion of any sort of "authenticity" in public performance. U.'s visible, public persona hinges on the strategically appropriate artifice—distant yet approachable, personal and impersonal, contrived and hypermediated— in order to properly conduct research, shaping the ways that his subjects relate to him and that he relates to the Company. That the success of his research depends on the appropriate persona suggests the significance that such strategic platforming plays in the contemporary marketplace; after all, such a negotiation of a position within the field

remains so central to an understanding of the profession that it remains long after the rest of the bullshit has been excised. Indeed, it was U.'s successful manipulation of his subjects through capitalizing on personal relationships that led directly to his research's success, including his small success on the commercial literary market, and his great success within his Company. Whether because of his semi-academic musings on the relationship between "home" and "field" as an author and participant-observer, or his titillating first-hand accounts of "sex with a Lycra-miniskirted informant on your writing table at five a.m. when you're both tripping," U.'s published thesis brought him to the attention of the Jobs-esque Peyman, the owner of the Company, who decided to "pluck me from the dying branches of academia and re-graft me inside the febrile hothouse of his company" (26).

U.'s particular contribution is less corporate espionage than "purvey[ing] cultural insight" (23). As the Company's anthropologist, he conducts the research that is of interest to him, in service of the Company's larger, somewhat nebulous, goals. U. is a sort of coolhunter, serving the company's end by analyzing culture and hunting trends.[85] U. writes, "we unpick the fibre of a culture (ours) its weft and warp—the situations that it throws up, the beliefs that underpin and nourish it—and let a client in on how they can best get traction on this fibre so that they can introduce it into the weave of their own fine, silken thread, strategically embroider or detail it with a mini-narrative (a convoluted way of saying: sell their product)" (23). The narratives that can be developed from the keen observation of culture are best nurtured (and monetized) in the Company; indeed, the

[85] For more on the relationship between the cool-hunter contemporary literature, see Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*. Konstantinou traces the cool-hunter to William Gibson's fiction, specifically, and sees this figure as a part of a post-ironic strain in the contemporary, a response by writers such as Gibson, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Zadie Smith to postmodernity.

instrumental ends of the Company and the Publishing Industry are not dissimilar—selling their product. U.'s work—as both author figure and anthropologist—provides a useful reflection on the position of the author within the publishing industry: always, at once, writing one's work and marketing it. While McCarthy might disparage the "marketing people" in his essays, U.'s confused profession as both writer and merchant, demonstrates the degree to which corporate jargon and institutional priorities have infiltrated aesthetic production. And U.'s role, fusing market research and corporate analysis, is always directed toward the sort of positive information cascade that "the marketing people" can use, and adapt to, for commercial purposes (though the degree to which these commercial ends shape his own work is questionable).

Though successful and celebrated, U. feels ill at ease with the ends to which his work is put. It is clearly the process of research and writing that attracted U. to his position; he cares little about the Company's corporate dealings (as his complete disregard for the Company's major contract with Koob-Sassen—which remains unexplained throughout the novel—indicates). A defected academic, he is unable to shake the hold of his formal training in critical theory (nor does he much care to do so), which finds its way into the Reports that he prepares for his superiors. Describing his research on Levi's jeans and the different creasing patterns, U. frames his dossier in Deleuze's concept of *le pli*. "I took out all the revolutionary shit (Deleuze was a leftie)" (33). He also incorporated Badiou's concept of the rip, but "dropped the radical baggage from that, too (Badiou is virtually Maoist)" (33). Big retail companies are simply uninterested in critical theory and radicalism, and more interested in how their potential customers interact with their product; the citations are far less important than U.'s ability to create a cultural narrative that they can exploit. Yet, these

early dossiers, experimenting with theory and commerce, become a template for U.'s entire performance record at the Company, and stand-in as an allegory for McCarthy's own author platform: "feeding vanguard theory, almost entirely from the left side of the spectrum, back into the corporate machine" (33), under the guise of simply discussing a product as ubiquitous as jeans. While U. may be fully working within the confines—even exceeding the expectations of—the institution in which he works, these small acts of resistance allow him to translate the workings of one institution to another. His success in image-management and his mastery of corporate jargon have secured him the distinction to manipulate its workings, subversively pitting the Corporation against itself. "The machine could swallow everything, incorporate it seamlessly, like a giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring its raw form, into what [Claude Lévi-Strauss] would have called a master-pattern—or, if not that, then maybe just the pattern of the master" (33).

U. typifies the sort of "amused complicity" that James English has identified as a key posture for the cultural producer in the economy of prestige, employing "a strategy that enables one to enjoy both the rewards of the game and the rewards due to those who are seen as standing above the game." Though U. is clearly complicit in the process of artistic commodification, his below-the-radar hostility toward the institution, as evidenced by his insertion of watered-down-theory, is enough for him to hold the (tenuous) moral and ideological high-ground. Said another way, U. understands what is expected of him, and performs his task (more than) adequately, but is also able to maintain his own sense of aesthetic and critical credibility through such subtle subversion. This stance "above" the game, even while mired in it, English argues, allows authors to "gesture toward that imaginary separate space on which the ideology and institution of modern art have been

predicated, the space outside all economies, where artistic genius is a gift rather than a form of capital and where the greatness of great art is beyond all measure or manipulation except by the sure determinations of Time" (215). This space, of course, does not exist. As McCarthy writes in "The death of writing," There is no space outside [corporate capitalism], no virgin territory of pure "aesthetics" or neutral "reflection" on which it hasn't impacted," including U.'s platform as a writer, and including his attempted subversion of the Company. Yet, U.'s awareness of the ways in which he is forced to operate, and his subtle manipulation of the Company, is essential in his position-taking within his overlapping fields. U.'s consistent commitment to "vanguard theory" allows him to work within "the machine" without being fully apart of it. It is because of this subversion that U. achieves a degree of prestige outside of the Company as well, maintaining his connections and (to a lesser degree) his credibility within academic spheres. U. regularly attends academic conferences, he tells us, in order to maintain his connection with his field. His work is, seemingly, accepted in both the corporate and academic settings, recognized as a valid and exciting methodology in each field. He gives TED style talks, and attends conferences addressing topics that are all too familiar to McCarthy's academic readers, such as The Contemporary. U. has managed, at once, to achieve corporate and academic distinction, even while remaining committed to his aesthetic practices.

If U.'s strategy of "feeding vanguard theory… back into the corporate machine," sounds familiar, it is because it quite neatly mirrors McCarthy's own. In conjunction with McCarthy's larger platform, *Satin Island* proposes an alternative for the contemporary author, mobilizing the corporate-mandated platform as a strategy for critique. When fed back into the corporate machine, McCarthy's brainy brand acts as a sort of sabotage,

turning the corporation's mechanisms against itself by exposing the rather flimsy logic according to which international media conglomerates operate. McCarthy thus challenges not only the controlling force of a publishing industry that is becoming increasingly homogenized, but also leverages his own (unlikely) success in order to envision an alternative for authorship in response to such a conservative market.

I want to return, in closing, to *C*. More than presenting us with smart historical fiction, McCarthy masterfully exposes and upends the synergistic preference for upmarket, middlebrow fiction through his manipulation of generic form. On the surface, *C* appears to be the sort of novel that might achieve bestseller status; it meets all of the criteria that my participants referenced in chapters 1 and 2: historical fiction, a coming-of-age novel, campus novel, and war novel rolled into one. From the English countryside to a German work camp to an Egyptian excavation site, *C* sounds readily adaptable for the big screen—a historical epic, even. It was even nominated for the Man Booker Prize. Because of similarities in subject matter and time period, *C* is often compared to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, usually with reviewers upset that the former was not more like the latter. In *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani complained, "Unlike Mr. McEwan's masterpiece … "C" fails to engage the reader on the most basic level as a narrative or text." *C* is nothing like *Atonement* in sensibility or style, despite its admittedly conventional setup as a blockbuster novel. McCarthy argued that it was not "deliberate to make [*C*] conventional or publishable… because it ticks the boxes of being conventional and it even looks like its historical," though U.'s deliberate strategies of corporate sabotage suggest that we should not take McCarthy at his word on this point (Armesto). The visual effects of the novel send a very different story about the novel's position in the market. Peter Mendeslund, the

designer of *C*'s cover, was pressured to make the novel appear more conventional. Mendeslund recounts that the book's editor impressed upon him that, "this book, complex and rich in code as it is, is also a ripping yarn and… that if we play our cards right we can take this massive genius and give him the even larger audience he so richly deserves." But readers who came to *C* expecting *Atonement,* whether based on the cover art, the promotion strategy, or McCarthy's own discussions of the historic avant-garde were sorely disappointed: they found not the empathetic and complex characters, grisly depictions of war, or the poetic meditations on art—all hallmarks of McEwan's decidedly upmarket novel—but an emphasis on narrative flatness, a turn away from the human and toward the mechanic.

McCarthy attributes this frustration to the ways that readers have been trained to adopt the values of middlebrow fiction. "To complain that there are no proper characters in *C* just seems slightly absurd. It just shows what a massive schism there is now between what I'd call a recognisable literary – I don't want to use the word 'tradition' – but a literary genealogy, on the one hand, and commercial middlebrow fiction on the other. They're so far apart" (Armesto). Serge, the principal character, is in many ways denied interiority; rather, things happen *to* him, and he observes detachedly, without personal commentary. In comparison to the humanistic realism of, say, Ian McEwan, *C* offers a resounding challenge, deliberately thwarting readerly expectations of what a novel of its sort should be, how it should operate, and how its characters should move through its fictional world, despite the ways it was marketed. Readers expect a "ripping yarn" and they get a novel about codes, incest, transmission, Egyptology. The impression of a bait-and-switch is hard to escape. It is easy to see how and why *C* would appeal to publishers, and why they would

choose such a marketing strategy for the novel. It is also easy to see how and why McCarthy would have a reason to expose such market logic: how easy it is to package your work like the "comforting nostalgia" the industry privileges, and how easily everyone is fooled. To put it in U.'s terms, "The machine could swallow everything, incorporate it seamlessly, like a giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring" (33). Regardless of the intentions behind *C*'s packaging and promotion strategy, the frustration experienced by readers because of their unmet expectations gestures starkly to the conditions of *C*'s production and the industry's controlling, mediating influence. For readers to claim that the novel didn't meet their expectations is to throw those expectations—and how they came about—into relief. The information cascade surrounding the novel is no longer secondary; rather, readers were made to confront the institution's mediation, its role in shaping aesthetic values and its cultivation of taste. The result of a deliberate platforming strategy, the confusion surrounding what sort of novel *C* actually *was* powerfully gestures toward the conditions that shape the novel's packaging, marketing, and circulation, starkly illuminating the novel's critique of the aesthetic control exercised by cultural institutions.

Seen in the light of *C*'s packaging, *Satin Island* seems to accurately describe the strategy that McCarthy has already adopted. U.'s careful subversion, even if ultimately futile, allows him to function in a manner that he sees fit within the Company. The joke, it would appear, is on the client who is absorbing radical critical theory unwittingly, pleased only for a chance to nod, feigning understanding, and better sell their product. As U. considers his strategy of turning the machine of the corporation against itself, he reflects that this strategy also helps him understand his work. "While my supposed business, my 'official'

function, as a corporate ethnographer, was to garner meaning from all types of situation—to extract it[--]… I sometimes allowed myself to think that, in fact, things were precisely the other way round: that my job was to put meaning *in* the world, not take it from it" (33). As McCarthy describes it in "The death of writing," this act of meaning making is, in many ways, the signal contribution of modernism to world literature, part and parcel with his brand and platform. He describes *Ulysses* as an attempt at distilling and creating a whole culture, descending from Stephane Mallarmé's total book. The work of John Cage and William S. Burroughs is decidedly in this tradition, as McCarthy sees it. U. is not simply an author attempting to find his way within the Corporate system, but he is an experimental author attempting to find his way in a system that privileges only actionable and marketable data. The Company for U., and the publishing industry for McCarthy, becomes but one more inhuman technology that can be manipulated, experimented with, in this process of making meaning, producing meaningful data.

McCarthy's platform structures all levels of his resistance to the publishing industry's demands, in both form and function—whether through the information cascade surrounding a novel, in the manipulation of a novel's marketing and circulation, or in the act of duping and exposing the corporation. *Satin Island*, I think, is also an attempt at a sort of universal reorientation, one way of rethinking and remapping authorship in the contemporary. *Satin Island* shows us an artist pushing the limits of what is allowed him in the corporation, a small rebellion made possible because of his platform—his small measure of popular acclaim and his readership. The author platform becomes not only a means of resistance, but also that which makes any semblance of resistance possible. The author platform may serve the ends of the multimedia conglomerate, but because of the

influence that a sizable platform accords an author, it is also a means of job security. The larger one's platform, regardless of its position toward the corporations-that-be, in fact preserves "genuine creative speculation," that the INS favors in its writers; that is to say, in "executing the brief dictated by corporate market research"—infusing one's platform with the requisite flare of an avant-garde collective such as the INS, the writer may, in fact, be equipped to challenge the "certainties of middle-brow aesthetics."

CHAPTER FOUR:

Distributors

I. Because Amazon.com is Insufficient

After the Georgia Flu decimated the world's population—after the borders disintegrated, after the news stations blinked out, and after a bedraggled civilization reinvented itself in the hollow husks of former chain restaurants and superstores—a scientist in Traverse City, Michigan tries to find the Internet. "A few of the younger [survivors] had felt a little thrill when he'd said this, remembered the stories they'd been told about Wi-Fi and the impossible-to-imagine Cloud, wondered if the Internet might still be out there somehow, invisible pinpricks of light suspended in the air around them" (38). The survivors of the Georgia Flu live in shells of former chain restaurants and big box stores, dwellings that serve as much as monuments to the world-that-was as testaments to survivors' ingenuity: a prophet and his militia take up residence in a Wal-Mart, a midwife tends to her patients in a Wendy's. While multinational corporations have fallen along with the rest of civic and economic institutions, artistic institutions remain. We tour the post-apocalyptic landscape with The Traveling Symphony, a group of ragtag actors and musicians who travel between makeshift "towns," performing Shakespeare's plays and Mozart's concertos. Emblazoned on the side of their wagon is their motto, a line cribbed from *Star Trek*: "Because Survival is Insufficient."

A world without Wi-Fi or Wal-Mart—a strange choice of a book to herald the rebirth of an online retailer. With Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) serving as the first beacon sent to far-flung subscribers after a near 10-year silence, the famed Book-of-the-

Month rebranded and relaunched for a new generation of readers and a new economic system (dropping both the "Club" and the hyphens). In many ways, the original Book-of-the-Month Club is as unfamiliar to our wired world as the Cloud is to the survivors of the Georgia Flu; it is a remnant of a time when books were not recommended at the urging of Amazon algorithms or purchased with One-Click Ordering, but by sending in an order form after reading a description in a mail-order catalog. For academics, the Book-of-the-Month Club conjures up different associations: namely, Janice Radway's famous study of the Club in the 1970s and 80s, which became crucial to our definition of the category of the middlebrow. *Station Eleven* is an emissary of a Club that bears only a passing resemblance to the organization that Radway joined in 1975, studied through the late 1980s, and detailed in her 1997 study *A Feeling for Books*. In the 20+ years since Radway's study, Book-of-the-Month has changed substantially, undertaking a massive rebranding effort to keep up with the economic and technological changes that nearly shut the Club down for good. In fact, Book of the Month 2.0 does more than "keep up." As a distributional "middleman"—conduit, rather—positioned between consumer and conglomerate, Book of the Month has managed to achieve what conglomerates have not: systematic data collection from contemporary readers through an emphasis on the creative contribution of prosumers.

In this chapter, I examine the modes of literary production and consumption that Book of the Month engenders as a distributional conduit in the Subscription Economy. The Subscription Economy has revised consumer interaction in the age of abundance, relying heavily on social media interaction to optimize "Customer Lifetime Value." Positioned between conglomerates, on the one hand, and consumers on the other, Book of the Month

monetizes *the act of reading* as a luxurious, community-oriented experience made possible via their expert judges, superior distribution, and cute branding. Until now, we have seen the directionality of the middleman's influence flowing one-way—from corporation to literature. In this chapter, I consider how the middleman's position *between* two institutions facilitates a multidirectional form of influence, a two-way feedback loop. Relying heavily on social media—Instagram, in particular—BOTM encourages consumer-generated advertising while collecting massive amounts of subscriber data, fusing reading, advertisement, and surveillance in a rather more sinister embrace of the data-driven ethics of online-based corporations. Inasmuch as Radway's Book-of-the-Month Club (hereafter "the Club" or "Book-of-the-Month" with hyphens) indexed the fusion of the middlebrow with the mergers and acquisitions of the 1980s, I argue that the BOTM's relaunch reflects the changing dynamics of the marketplace in the contemporary: namely, the pursuit of quantification and automation, transforming the otherwise unpredictable process of book sales.

In arguing that Book of the Month 2.0 is as central to our understanding of literary commerce and culture in the contemporary as was Radway's Club, this chapter seeks to reconfigure the relationship between literary distribution, book marketing, and the Creative Class. One of the key claims of Radway's study of the Club was that it consolidated the category of the middlebrow for a growing Professional-Managerial class. In its monthly selections, the original Club targeted this class of readers, the "general reader": that is the "individual who could not reproduce technical competence but who could, out of need and desire, recognize its claims, revere it, and make use of it for practical ends" (275). More than simply producing middlebrow culture by circulating middlebrow fiction, Radway

argues that Book-of-the-Month, in fact, initiated a program of "social training and pedagogy," promising their membership of general readers "the chance to keep up with the ever-advancing production of new knowledge as well as the opportunity to confirm its identity as educated and au courant" (276). In other words, Book-of-the-Month sold middlebrow culture by arguing its centrality to the attainment of Professional-Managerial class status, arguing that "a certain facility with the material contained in books could assure [subscribers] of social success" (277). With this "general reader" in mind, the Book-of-the-Month Club emphasized both the entertainment value of literature and its function as a means of social advancement. Radway's Book-of-the-Month Club thus created a new middlebrow taste for a new economic class.

By contrast, Book of the Month 2.0 positions itself not in relationship to the middle-class (at which the middlebrow was specifically aimed) but to the so-called Creative Class, as proposed by sociologist-guru Richard Florida. Florida defines the creative class as "people who add economic value through their creativity"; beyond creative labor, this class shares "a set of lifestyle preferences to which governments, human resource departments, and urban developers should appeal" (Brouillette 21). Additional characteristics include: high levels of education and mobility, an attraction to "authentic" and "diverse" cultural expression, a rejection of all things corporate. Through packaging the reading experience as an inherently creative, community-oriented pursuit, and the promotion of prosumption, Book of the Month 2.0 both envisions its subscribers as members of the Creative Class and cultivates subscribers' creative aspirations. Just as Radway's Book-of-the-Month helped subscribers to envision their relationship to a burgeoning middle-class, so too does Book of the Month 2.0 fulfill a pedagogical role for its millennial target subscribers in cultivating,

promoting, and even monetizing the desires of the Creative Class. Book of the Month 2.0 teaches its subscribers how to desire and behave in a world in which creative expression drives economic success through its emphasis on a prosumption, transforming reading into a practice of neoliberal self-care. The revamped BOTM helps to clarify the relationship between the category of the "upmarket" that I have emphasized throughout this project and the emergence of the so-called creative class of prosumers.

My argument proceeds in three main sections: first, I pick up where Radway left up, tracing the resurrection of Book of the Month from the remnants of the Club. Second, I discuss BOTM's rebrand, showing how they position themselves as an indispensable distributional middleman for today's busy reader, while exploiting the key principles of the Subscription Economy; I close-read Book of the Month's promotional materials and packaging to show how they sell The Reading Life as a community-oriented and creative, an opportunity for self-care. I then read Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* as a key component of Book of the Month's relaunch, a sort of bookish brand ambassador. While Book of the Month uses *Station Eleven* as lens through which it can reimagine itself as a cultural institution providing a therapeutic escape through artistic appreciation, the novel presciently raises important questions regarding data collection and surveillance—questions that BOTM would rather its subscribers not ask. My reading of *Station Eleven* prompts me to turn, finally, to Book of the Month's data collection practices, considering the implications of data analytics for contemporary literature.

Book of the Month: Then, Now

The goals of the new Book of the Month are not much different than the Club's founding 1926 ideals—to "[provide] avid readers with a fun, convenient, and affordable way to discover and buy new books each month," and "a way of discovering—and buying—the best new books to read now." Since its founding, Book-of-the-Month has positioned itself as the consumer's middleman, mediating between the information-overload of the publishing industry and the discerning reader's desire to read the best books of their day. During Radway's time at the Club, she reported a great deal of anxiety amongst the editorial staff because of the encroaching influence of the Club's parent company, Time, Inc. Such a story is typical of smaller houses and book-based businesses in the 1980s and 90s, crystallizing the tensions felt by many in publishing: how can we remain true to our company mission when we are run by a far-flung parent company who doesn't know our readers? How can we continue providing educational and important literature as a public service while also retaining readers and meeting monthly sales goals? Aware of the options—adapt or fold—the challenges mitigated by Book of the Month reflect those of a changing industry at large.

In 1994, facing pressure to cut costs, the Club dissolved the Editorial Board, whose tastes and discernment guided the Club's decisions about what books to offer their members, and whose reports comprised the main data of Radway's study. *The New York Times* described this decision as heralding the "end [of] a venerable publishing institution that has become increasingly marginalized over the years, as the time between a manuscript's submission and publication has shrunk and market considerations have

grown ever more important."[86] Then editor-in-chief Tracy Brown justified this decision by arguing that the editorial board was an institution out of pace with the speed of the contemporary market; yet, the Editorial Board was central to Book of the Month's claims of providing quality fiction to its subscribers, and therefore central to the company's mission. Judge David W. McCullough told the *Times*, "The books that we selected weren't always the expected best sellers, but what we honestly thought were the best books we'd read that month…More and more, the focus shifted to predicting what was going to be on the best-seller list. I think idiosyncratic qualities are falling out of publishing in general and the industry is becoming financially conservative, focused on sure things and not wanting to take risks." Without the editorial stamp of quality, Book-of-the-Month seemed to be losing sight of that which distinguished it from other book clubs, including their chief competitor, the Literary Guild. In 2000, Time Warner joined with publishing giant Bertelsmann to create Bookspan, a company that manages over 40 monthly book clubs—including former competitor, the Literary Guild. Generally, the Bookspan acquisition seems to have been viewed positively, a hopeful sign that the Club's performance might improve with the backing of two corporate giants. The opposite proved true: whether because of the dissolution of the editorial board, or because of shifts in the marketplace, membership began to dwindle. In 2001, membership clocked in at less than 700,000, a 15-year low; by 2003, others were estimating 350,000.

The Club's demise is often attributed to Amazon's "recommended for you" algorithms, rendering the recommending and taste-making functions of the Club obsolete. When searching for a new book, readers had only to type the name of a favorite title into

[86] Lyall, Sarah. "Book-of-the-Month to End Its Advisory Panel." *The New York Times*. 1 July 1994.

Amazon's search bar in order to receive algorithmically tailored recommendations. Book-of-the-Month, and other such book clubs, were no longer essential for helping readers identify publications that were suited to their tastes. Headlines such as "The Book-of-the-Month-Club takes steps to get out of trouble" were followed by stories that saw the demise of the Club as an emblem for the death of the book.[87] The Club tried to reclaim their hold on the market, installing a panel of celebrity judges, but the convenient user experience of Amazon.com had rendered monthly mailings "quaint" by comparison. In 2007, Bertelsmann (now owner of Penguin Random House and the largest of the Big Five), took full control of Bookspan.[88] In typical post-acquisition fashion, Bertelsmann consolidated, closing less profitable club operations and retaining a few niche clubs (including a Spanish-language club, an African American literature club, and an LGBT club, suggesting a desire to promote and distribute underrepresented—and likely, understocked—fiction[89]); despite their low membership numbers, and presumably because of their venerable history, Book of the Month was spared the "Bookspan Bloodbath."[90] Bookspan, under Bertelsmann, focused renewed energy on Book-of-the-Month Club along with several other flagship outfits.[91] No fanfare, no news: seemingly business as usual. And then the Club "went dormant." *Publishers Weekly* reported that, on or about August 1, 2014, the Club had

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[87] Wyatt, Edward. "Book Club Takes Steps to Get Out of Trouble." *The New York Times*. 12 January 2005. Accessed 4 September 2017.
[88] DirectGroup Bertelsmann Acquires Time Inc.'S 50% Stake in Bookspan Partnership." *Businesswire.com*. 10 April 2007. Accessed 4 September 2017.
[89] See Nord, *A History of the Book in America, Vol. 5.*
[90] Press releases from May 24, 2007 report the elimination of 280 (or 1,900) positions. See "Bertelsmann Makes Changes to Newly Acquired Bookspan."
[91] Bookspan has since been acquired by the mysterious Pride Tree Holdings; there is little to no information about this strange parent company online. This acquisition does not appear to have affected marketing operations. See Lazarus, "Book Club's Corporate Owners are Cloaked in Mystery."

eliminated all traces that it may yet be a functioning company. Its members were quietly transitioned over to the Literary Guild. The website blinked out.

On November 14, 2014, Book of the Month posted an image of its newly redesigned logo to Instagram, with the caption, "Book of the Month is coming back, baby #books #bookofthemonth." (see figure 10).

Figure 10: Book of the Month 2.0 debuts on Instagram.

This post seems to have served as the first and primary announcement that changes were afoot for the Club, that it hadn't been shuttered completely. As we will see, this initial Instagram post, which garnered a pitiful 13 likes, marks a drastic shift in Book of the Month branding and clientele. Moreover, it signals the centrality of the social media platform in Book of the Month's relaunch—and to the economy that has supported the successful rejuvenation of the company: the Subscription Economy.

II. The Subscription Economy

The "Subscription Economy" (alternately known as Subscription Commerce, SubCom, or the Membership Economy) refers to a shift in business transactions and revenue streams—from purchasing products to subscribing to services. Seen most visibly in media streaming companies, such as Netflix, subscription services charge subscribers

nominal monthly fees for seemingly limitless access to a product, software, or service. While estimates differ, some experts estimate that SubCom is growing at a rate of 100% annually.[92] Several business-consulting firms have attributed the rise and success of the subscription models to the recession of 2008, which triggered a shift in purchasing practices; as the economy recovers, consumers are less interested in owning than renting, particularly for the nominal fees that SubCom companies demand.[93] In exchange for ownership, subscribers receive both automation (an initial transaction, automatically renewed monthly; products delivered automatically; seamless access to software) as well as personal customization. Subscription businesses use the data that subscribers surrender in order to deliver targeted and personalized products (Netflix algorithmically curates a selection of films or TV shows "Suggested for You"). Indeed, as we will see, the Subscription Economy is powered by Big Data. SubCom has been so effective that many traditional companies, from Wal-Mart to HBO, are developing subscription options to a brick-and-mortar or product-based business.

The Subscription Economy shifts the value proposition of a commercial transaction; subscribers now pay for access and services rendered, rather than the physical goods themselves. As such, publishing has been slow to adopt subscription models. Publishing is a product-based industry, one whose entire business model is built on number of copies printed and purchased. A number of startups have attempted to launch a "Netflix for Books," but none of these startups has taken off— because, one would assume, the original "Netflix

[92] Chen, Tony, Ken Fenyo, Sylvia Yang, and Jessica Zhang. "Thinking inside the subscription box: New research on e-commerce consumers."
[93] Cassar, Ken. "Subscription Model Growth and Trend."

for Books," the public library, is free.[94] By contrast, consider the largest segment of SubCom—Software as a Service (SaaS). Subscribers pay a monthly or annual fee for membership and access to a Cloud or server space (as in the case of Dropbox), a suite of software (Adobe recently converted Photoshop to an SaaS model), or a variety of online streaming services (as in Netflix or Spotify). Subscribers receive nothing tangible when they subscribe in SaaS programs. Rather, they subscribe to the underlying technological structures that make such services accessible, personal, and responsive. In the contrast between publishing and SaaS, we see the key difference between product-based and subscription economic models. When a customer purchases a book from their local bookseller, they participate in a one-time transaction; the customer becomes the owner of a product, a book, and it is hers to do with as she pleases (write in the margins, dog-ear the pages, lend it to a friend). When this customer has finished reading her book, she may return to the same bookseller to buy something new, or she may purchase a new book for less money on Amazon, or she might pick up a paperback she finds at an airport kiosk. In the Subscription Economy, customers and corporations enter into an ongoing relationship, solidified by a monthly automatic payment; the convenience and regularity promised by a regular subscription is often more of a draw than the products on offer. For a corporation, the benefit is clear: reliable and predictable revenue. This long-term transactional relationship also shifts a company's attention, from their products to their customers, providing increasingly personalized experiences and anticipating subscribers' needs, based

[94] There are some notable exception to the "Netflix for Books" experiments. Amazon has launched Kindle Unlimited, a monthly eBook subscription service; as of yet, it does net appear to have caught on with customers. Audiobook seller Audible.com, an Amazon subsidiary, has successfully monetized audiobook subscriptions. Indeed, audiobooks are the fastest growing segment of the publishing industry; one might speculate that the prevalence and success of audiobooks subscription plans has fueled this growth.

on user-generated data. That data not only personalizes the user experience (think of Netflix recommendations), but also becomes a revenue stream in and of itself, for, as we will see, subscriptions have become major sources of market research.

Of course, subscriptions are not new. Indeed, Harry Scherman's original Book-of-the-Month Club is easy shorthand for discussing monthly subscription companies. Yet, central to Book of the Month's rebranding is the overwhelming growth of e-commerce.[95] While online shopping initially registered Book of the Month and other such subscription companies obsolete, companies have begun to reframe the limitlessness of online shopping as a liability for customers in search of quality; the Subscription Economy was born, in part, out of a recognition that the internet has made consumption both overwhelming and time consuming. Subscription *Boxes*, and their promise of curated experiences, provide a new opportunity to automate book purchasing and ensure customer satisfaction.

Box of the Month

Book of the Month has repurposed the catalog-based delivery system as a monthly Subscription Box, one of the fastest growing trends in the Subscription Economy. Each month, BOTM subscribers receive not only their book selection in a colorfully packaged, heavily-branded gift Box. Subscription Boxes have become trendy in the Subscription Economy because, unlike SaaS, they personify the role of the distributor, aestheticize the act of reception, and maximize the customer experience through the guise of a relationship. Subscription Boxes—and the experience of "unboxing"—are designed to be sold and shared on social media, even spawning a new genre of YouTube "unboxing" videos,

[95] The US Commerce Department statistics show that e-commerce comprised 13% of all retail sales from 2017.

dedicated to opening and meticulously describing each and every item inside. Through the packaging of these Boxes, BOTM has reinvented itself as a company, all while promoting a luxury-based model of reading for the 21st century woman reader—and while gathering as much of that reader's personal data as possible.

Subscription Boxes are a relatively new trend, and BOTM is the book-based subscription of record. Beginning in 2010 with Birchbox and Dollar Shave Club—the first two subscription boxes to receive venture capital funding—over 2,000 subscription box companies have since launched. In 2015, just as Book of the Month was preparing to relaunch, Elizabeth Segran mused in *Fast Company*, "One must wonder if we've hit peak Precious Box Delivery Services."[96] The answer, clearly, was no: as of September 2017, MySubscriptionAddiction.com, a website that boasts a comprehensive database of current SubCom offerings, lists 2,607 unique subscription boxes. A Subscription Box meta-industry has spring up, with startups such as CrateJoy, BoxUp, and Zuora helping entrepreneurs start their *own* subscription boxes—Subscribing to Subscriptions for a low monthly fee.

Subscription Boxes fall into two main categories: Replenishment or Discovery. Replenishment subscription boxes, accounting for 32% of subscriptions,[97] automate the process of purchasing everyday household goods—the staple items that need to be refilled at predictable, regular intervals, such as paper towels, laundry detergent, or diapers. The Dollar Shave Club, for instance, delivers replacement razor blades monthly for $1. Because these products are quickly consumed and used regularly, replenishment boxes assuring convenience to subscribers and deliver steady revenue and a useful data stream for

[96] Segran, Elizabeth. "From Socks to Sex Toys: Inside America's Subscription Box Obsession." *Fast Company*. 6 April 2015

[97] Chen, Tony, Ken Fenyo, Sylvia Yang, and Jessica Zhang. "Thinking inside the subscription box: New research on e-commerce consumers."

companies.[98] The Discovery model, by contrast, exposes subscribers to new brands within a given retail sector (i.e., food, entertainment, apparel, books). Discovery Boxes are far more popular, accounting for 60% of subscriptions. Subscribers receive a host of new, up-and-coming products or brands in themed boxes; these items tend to be luxury goods, and Discovery Boxes tend to be marketed to women.[99] Along with Dollar Shave Club was Birchbox, a cosmetics-sample subscription that also launched in 2010 with much VC fanfare.[100] Birchbox and similar Discovery boxes provide products designed for their client demographic, usually targeting a very small product niche. Loot Crate, for instance, sends novelty goods to "Geeks and Gamers"—comics, bobbleheads, t-shirts. Kiwi Crate sends children's art supplies. Book of the Month provides the best new hardcover releases.

In its rebrand, Book of the Month targets two key problems that consumers face: First, the problem of abundance, and second, the problem of quality.[101] In conversation with *The New York Times*, Birchbox founder Katia Beauchamp described the contemporary retail situation to which Birchbox offers a solution: "We realized that when people walk into Sephora, you opt out of making a choice to learn more because there is so much to choose from… With four or five samples a month, you can really sink your teeth into a new

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[98] Amazon.com has recently attempted to break into the Replenishment subscription business with their "Subscribe and Save" program, providing subscribers with small, Wi-Fi equipped buttons with which to activate their standard replenishment order.
[99] McKinsey Analytics has reported that 60% of subscribers are women; yet, men are more likely to have 3+ active subscriptions
[100] Birchbox raised $1.4 million in financing from VC firms such as First Round, Accel Partners, and Forerunner Ventures. See Wortham, Jenna. "Birchbox Aims to Simplify the Business of Beauty." *The New York Times*.
[101] Book of the Month is not the only company to turn to the Box model, but they have been very successful in a very short period of time. Several other book-based boxes include themed novelty items to accompany a monthly selection: a Gryffindor scarf, hypothetically, to accompany a Harry Potter-themed box.

product and decide if you want to buy the product in full size."[102] Unlimited choices are not helpful for consumers, Discovery Boxes argue; the average consumer is too busy to sift through endless shelves—or worse, pages and pages of online stores. The problem that first destroyed the Club—Amazon's "world's largest selection"—ultimately motivated BOTM's comeback. As with all Discovery Boxes, BOTM makes the central claim that its consumers are too overwhelmed and too overworked to navigate the uncharted waters of Amazon's selection. Their website advertises "We make it easy—and fun—to discover what's new and not-to-be-missed," and prompts subscribers to create accounts with a telling call-to-action: "Every month we bring you five new books you'll love. We narrow it down from hundreds of new releases (so you don't have to)." Impugning the process of searching for books, particularly influential and high-quality titles as both difficult and onerous, Book of the Month imagines their core subscriber as an especially *busy* young, well-educated woman who enjoys reading—too busy to deal with the problem of abundance. While the BOTM core subscriber is too busy to shop for hours, she is also too discerning to read just anything. Because BOTM imagines a discerning reader as the ideal subscriber, the company's solution to the problem of abundance is only meaningful if the products on offer are also of a high quality. Just as BirchBox subscribers would never buy cosmetics at a pharmacy, BOTM subscribers would never pick up *just any book*. As such, it is crucial to the credibility of the Discovery Box Model that products be pre-vetted and *curated*. BOTM touts their curated titles at every turn on the website, referring to their selections as "hidden gems", "carefully chosen selections." Lest there be any doubt of BOTM's track record, they highlight past selections like *Gone with the Wind,* and *The*

[102] Wortham, Jenna. "Birchbox Aims to Simplify the Business of Beauty." *The New York Times*.

Catcher in the Rye; they draw on their history of "obsessively reading, discussing, and sharing the most enjoyable books of the moment… we have a history of knowing how to pick 'em." In their relaunch, BOTM restored the Judge Panel from their original business plan to address the problem of quality, suggesting a personal touch to the act of curation.[103] BOTM now offers five monthly selections from which member can choose, one selection per Judge. Subscribers can get the brand new, frontlist hardcover for as low as $14.99 a month—less than the same book would cost at a brick-and-mortar store or on Amazon.

Though they deliver physical products, Subscription Boxes assert the key SubCom value of access over ownership; subscribers are paying less for products than for the particular lifestyle benefits on offer. Importantly, Subscription Boxes shift the value proposition of the transaction from the material goods sent to subscribers to the *experience* of subscription. Discovery Boxes like Book of the Month have been described as "care packages," and "gifts you give yourself," transforming the basic retail experience into a luxury treat. Subscribers pay for a sensory experience: anticipating their monthly or quarterly delivery, opening the box and inspecting each item, appreciating the taste of the curator, and feeling the accompanying emotions of surprise, delight, curiosity. These feelings are designed to create customer loyalty, keeping subscribers from cancelling their accounts. They get more than a book; they get feelings.

Packaging an Experience

Beyond content-based branding, such as website copy, BOTM's brand cohesion extends to the physical packages it sends to monthly subscribers. Like all subscription box

[103] Members are still able to exercise their "negative option," passing on a given month if selected title(s) do not appeal.

companies, Book of the Month pays particular attention to the aesthetic and tactile qualities of their boxes and packaging. Because the value of the subscription box is on the subscription rather than the products, it is crucial that physical boxes contribute to the overall customer experience, promoting the value proposition of the subscription: in this case, monetizing reading as a service. Likewise, because subscription companies monetize an experience rather than a product, the subscriber engages *exclusively* with the company only when "unboxing." SubCom cannot afford to treat boxes as throwaway items, instead integrating boxes and packaging into the process of branding, thus framing the overall customer experience.

SubCom takes Boxes and the "unboxing" experience so seriously that several meta-subscription companies have developed in order to help entrepreneurs design and package their own subscription boxes; the most prominent of these is CrateJoy, who monetize a "Subscription School" in addition to supplying material goods. Subscription School writer Felicity Fromholz asks potential entrepreneurs to consider a scenario:

> When a customer opens the door and picks up your shipment, will they see a package featuring a bold, custom, one-of-a-kind color design? If so, you've created more than a purchase, you've created a moment – a connection has been created – an emotion has been stirred. And it's all because you put as much thought into your package as you did your product.[104]

The Box aesthetics are calibrated to seamlessly promote the experiences that companies want their subscribers to have with their service. CrateJoy argues that "the way your customers feel as they unwrap your product is almost as important as how they feel

[104] Fromholz, Felicity. "Designing Your Box: Creating a Moment with Color." *Subscription School.*

when they use it, read it or write with it," and places great emphasis on the "unboxing" experience as the first, and most important, point of contact with subscribers. CrateJoy identifies a number of key components of successful box design (including size, color, and logo placement).

It would be challenging to mistake a Book of the Month box for any other package, just as it would be practically impossible to mistake a Book of the Month book from its nearly-identical counterpart, purchased from Barnes and Noble. Consistent with industry standards, Book of the Month's new logo adorns the box, as well as every imaginable surface inside. BOTM branding extends to the books themselves. The books received from Book of the Month are markedly different than those purchased at Barnes and Noble: they are covered with the Book of the Month insignia, ensuring that any social media sharing can be properly attributed, and that subscribers who read in public places act as walking advertisements for the company. By my count, the BOTM logo appears no less than three times on the book's dust jacket (on the spine, on the front cover, and above the bar code and ISBN on the back cover), twice on the hard-cover of the book, along with the month of its release, and one additional title page bearing the BOTM insignia. While Book of the Month is not responsible for producing this product, they have taken branded packaging to an extreme, going so far as to infiltrate the book itself.

Furthermore, the unboxing should create "a visceral experience," for subscribers , increasing a subscriber's sense of attachment to the products that they receive—and to the brand that the products promote. (CrateJoy recommends wrapping each item individually to maximize physical contact.) Book of the Month also creates a uniquely tactile experience through the "gifts-with-purchase" that they send their subscribers on a (nearly) monthly

basis—a bound short story by Gillian Flynn to occasion the release of her new novel, for instance, or a Ring Pop to accompany a novel entitled *The Engagement.* These items promote a brand loyalty and engagement, encouraging users to continue to subscribe to Book of the Month *even though* they can purchase these books at their local Barnes and Noble, or with a click via Amazon. They provide a reason for customers to continue to engage with the company, for a thrill accompanies each box of goodies. During my time as a subscriber, I have received a coloring book and matching colored pencils, a wine koozie (to be used for consuming rosé *exclusively*, I was instructed), and a leather luggage tag. Book of the Month extends industry standards for tactility, insisting not only that subscribers interact with each item, but that they engage in a full sensory experience. Through coloring, subscribers engage visually; with their Ring Pops or wine koozies, subscribers taste and smell. The leather luggage tag is not only especially tactile, but it suggests full-bodied engagement through the act of travel. Each item needs to be touched and unpacked individually, but also creates an ongoing sensorial and tactile experience. These items each suggest that reading is associated with pleasure—sweet candy or savory wine, travel and adventure—and with leisure.

Book of the Month 2.0 taps into both the Replenishment and Discovery models to shift its value proposition from books to the subscription experience, delivering far more than a competitively priced hardcover book: rather, through advertising and subscriber engagement, Book of the Month is actively reframing reading (and book ownership) as an *experience*, a *lifestyle*. The Box sets the stage, defining the terms of reading in general, and the experience of reading the particular book the subscriber holds in her hands. Branding,

tactility, and calls to action are all mobilized in service of Book of the Month's ultimate goal of monetizing the reading life.

III. The Reading Life

Reading as Relationship

The Subscription Economy has become so massive that business analytics firms such as McKinsey have begun to refer to the "subscription lifestyle." And, in many ways, a lifestyle is precisely what Book of the Month offers to its subscribers. This is accomplished, in part, by a very narrowly defined target demographic. While Scherman's Club was committed to providing books for the "general" reader, neither restricted by gender, class, nor education level, BOTM 2.0 defines their "core audience" more narrowly: "young, well-educated women (age 20-35) who love reading contemporary fiction for pleasure."[105] Book of the Month's target audience is thus a microcosm of the larger demographics that tend toward Subscriptions generally; McKinsey & Co. researchers found that most subscribers fall within 25-44 years of age, with incomes ranging from $50,000-$100,000. Most live in the Northeastern cities in the United States.[106] The notion of "the reading life" that Book of the Month promotes is thus embedded in upward mobility, social class, and the youthfulness associated with older millennials who comprise the Creative Class. Moreover, given the emphasis on education, salary-range, and "pleasure," Book of the Month joins a number of Discovery Boxes in reframing their service as the provision of leisure.

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[105] Book of the Month Club. "Position: Creative Director."
[106] Chen, Tony, Ken Fenyo, Sylvia Yang, and Jessica Zhang. "Thinking inside the subscription box: New research on e-commerce consumers."

As I have noted, Book of the Month's rebrand included a name change; the outmoded "Club" was dropped, the company going simply by "Book of the Month." Yet, the company has intensified the social and community functions implied in the original "club," leveraging social media and online message boards to create a community of readers. The Book of the Month Club was a club inasmuch as readers became members through subscription; yet this was a primarily functional solution to the problem of book distribution, with very little expectation of social interaction or community building. While the original Book of the Month offered a one-way, vertical interaction with the company (subscribers sent their money, received a book), Book of the Month 2.0 encourages horizontal relationships, prompting their readers to engage with one another in their book review message boards and, predominantly, in their ongoing social media campaigns on Instagram, even while offering increasingly personal and personalized vertical relationships between subscriber and company.

Vertical relationships are particularly significant for reinforcing the notion of a curatorial "best friend," selecting books suited to subscribers' tastes—a signature Discovery Box move. "I think every woman needs a best friend who is a beauty editor to curate the clutter and find the best products for them," Birchbox founder Beauchamp argued about her own Discovery startup. But Book of the Month takes Beauchamp's imaginary best friend one further by building their Judges—as real, live humans, both professionals and celebrities—into their branding and marketing. Included in each monthly Box is a branded bookmark that corresponds with the given book selection. In addition to physically inserting the company directly into the pages of the book—a sort of moving billboard—bookmarks heighten the reader's sense of the relational aspects of their

subscription: bookmarks feature a pencil-drawing of the Judge that recommended the book, and what appears to be a hand-written note from that Judge, describing why she enjoyed that book, and wishing readers a pleasurable reading experience; the bookmark text directly addresses readers as "You," suggesting a personal relationship between Judge and Subscriber. For readers that utilize the bookmark, the judge is ever-present through the reading experience. The three-sentence review mediates the reception of the text and of the book as a material object. The book becomes not a product, but a gift given thoughtfully by a friend, whose physical body, personality, and perspicacity is communicated through her portrait, vocabulary, handwriting, and a brief, but insightful, review that corresponds with the online Essays. In this way, BOTM builds a sense of trust, effacing the corporatized nature of their business by emphasizing the individuals—friends!—who comprise the company.

Not just friends—girlfriends. While BOTM conceives of their core subscriber as a "well-educated young woman," the company actively builds on notions of female friendship and community as a part of their community-building enterprise. While BOTM's monthly offerings are not exclusively "women's fiction," extending to general commercial and literary fiction that is not marketed exclusively to women, the company is explicit in the gendered nature of its redesign: Book of the Month 2.0 is a company run by and run for women readers. As such, the pleasures of "the reading life" that Book of the Month promotes is explicitly feminized. This is particularly clear in Book of the Month's recent commercial, in what amounts to an extended joke about menstruation.[107] Each situation of

[107] The commercial clearly references Lena Dunham's much-parodied "First Time" PSA recorded on behalf of the 2012 Obama campaign, in which the (well-educated, Brooklynite, millennial) Dunham winkingly compared her "first time" voting to losing her virginity:

this 30-second commercial features women bonding over their shared monthly delivery: two women in a restroom ("I really look forward to getting mine every month!"), two women in an elevator ("I just started mine." "Dude, me too! We're synced!"), a woman speaking to her grandmother ("You *still* get it, grandma?"), a woman on the phone with a friend ("It's so heavy, I cried!"). In the final vignette, a woman turns away her date, saying, "I'd invite you up, but… I just got my Book of the Month." (See figure 11.) She leans in to whisper the last salacious detail. In each of these instances, the shared experience of a Book of the Month subscription bonds two women; the only man in the commercial is actively excluded. This commercial makes clear what is merely implied in the Reader-Friendly Coloring Book: while reading may be an individualized and solitary experience, Book of the Month is, in fact, a community of readers.

Figure 11: "I'd invite you up, but I just got my... Book of the Month." Note the telltale blue box on the brownstone steps.

This ethos is replicated in the expectations for horizontal relationships between and amongst readers. Networks are key to growth in SubCom; BOTM assumes that each subscriber has a network of (girl)friends to whom she can recommend a product, and that network can and should be a key to subscriber growth. BOTM offers a "Refer a Friend,"

"Your first time shouldn't be with just anybody. You wanna do it with a great guy […] someone who really cares about and understands women. A guy who cares whether you get health insurance. […] A guy who brought the troops out of Iraq.")

option to new subscribers, offering free books in exchange for network and subscriber expansion. Moreover, Book of the Month's reliance on social media—particularly via the Facebook-owned photo-sharing app, Instagram—takes the notion of a social network much more seriously, relying on user-generated advertising to extend their reach beyond their followers to the followers' followers. In fact, Book of the Month relies almost exclusively on Instagram (itself a SaaS) as an advertising channel. So reliant is BOTM on Instagram for advertising and user interaction that the monthly packaging is replete with calls to action, urging subscribers to photographically document the items that they receive. "Beautiful photos, member posts, behind the scenes and more—all on Instagram! @bookofthemonthclub" is emblazoned on the box's top flap below the BOTM insignia, impossible to miss in the process of unpacking the box (see figure 12). A message like this appears on each product included in the box, and the Book of the Month insignia is duplicated across every surface and product, serving as a sort of product-placement to users' Instagram photographs.[108]

[108] It is worth noting that asking users to engage in Instagram is a way of recruiting users to the online message-boards and blogging community. I do not deal extensively with this element of Book of the Month's relaunch; these platforms closely resemble GoodReads, and a substantial body of work (particularly that of James English and Allison Hegel) is developing around the GoodReads community data.

Figure 12: Book of the Month's box branding

Book of the Month has rolled out several advertising campaigns on Instagram. Taking the form of competitions, in which winning Instagrammers receive a special gift or a three-month subscription, these posts fuse reading and performance; readers are invited to channel their creative energy into advertising on Book of the Month's behalf, sharing their creative products with other readers. Through Instagram—and, to a lesser extent, their other social media accounts—Book of the Month enlists users into the process of brand management, solidification, and promotion, even while encouraging them to share their love of reading with other readers.

For those subscribers who may be tentative shutterbugs—and in order to insure that user-generated advertising is on-brand—Book of the Month provides instructions for taking the "Perfect Book Shot," so that subscribers can replicate their signature Instagram aesthetic:

> 3 Steps to the Perfect Book Shot
>
> 1) Pick your setting
>
> Think: hipstery cafe/sunlit bedroom / nature scene. Bonus points for exposed brick.
>
> 2) Add some flair

Try a coffee cup/wine glass/vintage bicycle/beloved pet.

3) Don't be shy

Tag @bookofthemonthclub on Insta, and we'll repost our favorites ;)

The style of "book shot" that Book of the Month popularized has spread beyond the company, catching on particularly with those who participate in the #bookstagram hashtag. Book of the Month. #bookstagram posts, including those in which Book of the Month is tagged, have taken on a uniform aesthetic, such that "the reading life" appears serene and beautiful. Book of the Month has thus conveniently conflated itself with an online reading community, providing the visual aesthetic of the reading life and defining for social media what-reading-looks-like. So ubiquitous is the Book of the Month #bookstagram style that Penguin Random House's Instagram account has adopted the signature look, often including many of the same titles; the two accounts are virtually indistinguishable (see figures 13 and 14)

Figure 13: Book of the Month's #bookstagram account, this time with 1,916 likes.

Figure 14: Penguin Random House's Instagram account: same book, same latte?

In many ways, these Instagram campaigns amount to consumer-generated marketing, free publicity for Book of the Month in the guise of participation and community building. Moreover, Book of the Month clearly proves its worth to the publishers; it is not overwhelmingly clear that Figure 4 is an advertisement for Book of the Month nor that Figure 5 is an advertisement for Penguin Random House. Both images, though, clearly promote Paula Hawkins' recent novel, *Into the Water*. This advertisement helps Penguin Random House as much as it helps Book of the Month. In this way, Book of the Month leverages its position as a conduit to provide free, user-generated advertising back to publishers, even while providing subscribers a curated and convenient luxury product. All under the guise of community-building around the appreciation for "the reading life."

Reading as Creative

In addition to recasting reading as community-oriented, several BOTM Instagram campaigns have helped to clarify the notion of the lifestyle on offer. Nowhere is Book of the Month's vision of "the reading life" more clear than in the Reader-Friendly-Coloring Book

(see figures 15 and 16). A gift-with-purchase sent to subscribers in April of 2017, the Reader-Friendly Coloring Book most clearly crystallizes Book of the Month's ideas of "the reading life" as a creative life, as the message on the coloring book's inside cover communicates. "It's a chance for you to channel your creative energy into something fun and relaxing," BOTM suggests (leaving one to wonder what, then, the book is for, if not fun and relaxation). The coloring book suggests that subscribers are creative people, but their creative energy is being spent elsewhere. A book provided by BOTM, albeit a coloring book, will help that creativity to be appropriately tapped into and channeled toward leisure. As is written on the box of small colored pencils, BOTM encourages readers to "Color Between the Lines," at once encouraging basic coloring book technique while riffing on the familiar statements about close reading as occurring "between the lines." Alternatively, you can color outside of the lines, or "wherever the muse takes you." Subscribers are not passive receptors of knowledge, not merely encountering the creativity of the corporation, but participating in a creative act through their reading.

Figure 15: The "Reader Friendly Coloring Book," and a small box of colored pencils, two "special gifts" from BOTM.

Figure 16: The Inside Cover of the Reader-Friendly Covering Book, describing the ways that the coloring book celebrates the reading life and imploring users to post to Instagram.


Dear Member,

Each illustration in this book is a celebration of the reading life. It's a chance for you to channel your creative energy into something fun and relaxing. We've thrown in some pencils to help you "color between the lines"—or outside of them, wherever the muse takes you. Enjoy!

Think you've created a masterpiece? Share it on Instagram and tag **@bookofthemonthclub**. Members we repost will win three free months!

Happy coloring,

Book of the Month

The coloring book is filled with images of women reading; they are drawn in a manner that is racially ambiguous, such that subscribers can draw portraits of themselves participating in the reading life. Each image shows a woman reading in a different location: in a coffee shop with a cityscape in the background, on a park bench, on a couch (complete with a cuddling cat). These are predominantly urban settings, speaking to the typical subscriber's location. In each of these scenarios, the reader appears relaxed: reading is both leisurely and cozy. Barring the cat, each of these women appears alone despite the public nature of two of the three scenes, suggesting an absorptive quality to their reading; in drowning out their surroundings, reading is presented as calming and peaceful, but also all-engrossing.

While the Reader-Friendly Coloring Book may be an outlet for creative energy, it is also a catalyst for ongoing inspiration, as subscribers follow "wherever the muse takes" them. Creativity fuels creativity, the Coloring Book suggests; for the personal benefits to continue, so must the subscription. The company's tagline, echoing both shampoo bottles and Elizabeth Gilbert's blockbuster memoir of international self-care, asserts the necessity

of ongoing subscriber engagement: "Read. Love. Repeat." The Reader-Friendly Coloring Book further invites subscribers into the creative process, asking them to post their "masterpieces" on Instagram; the subscribers who color most impressively are promised to have their work promoted by BOTM and are rewarded a three-month membership. Engagement becomes a self-perpetuating process; the most-engaged subscribers are thus rewarded with increased engagement (at least, in three month increments).

Reading as Self-Care

As Book of the Month subscribers are women who enjoy channeling their creative energy into community-building efforts, it is only fitting that the subscription company should ask them to participate in defining "the reading life." On the heels of the Reader-Friendly Coloring Book Instagram campaign was another, the "Why I Read" campaign. Small placards, reading "I read for…_____" were included in monthly boxes. Subscribers were instructed to fill in the blank, describing for fellow subscribers (and BOTM employees) their motivation for reading. Subscribers were instructed to include their name and city, take a photo of the placard, and post the photos to Instagram with the appropriate hashtag.

Book of the Month supplies their own reasons for reading, each of which is particularly suggestive: "Read for the fun of it. Read for the feels. Read for the big reveal. Read for the 'aha!' moment. Read for the escape. Read for the reality check. Read for life." Entertainment, emotion, self-realization. Beyond simply the call to action, subscribers who post their photos to Instagram have the potential to be rewarded with additional books, or a free three-month subscription; photos that are especially fetching or that inventively

highlight monthly products get reposted by the Book of the Month social media manager. Presumably, those photos conscripted into BOTM promotional advertising best exemplify the ideals that Book of the Month is most eager to espouse.

Subscriber responses fell into five major categories: in keeping with the summer months, a number discussed reading as an escape akin to travel or adventure ("An exciting expedition!" or "A free trip to everywhere!"); several subscribers simply read for fun, while another group reads for inspiration. Another sizable group of subscribers read for some degree of interpersonal connection, whether with children, mothers, or friends. The largest, group, however, attested to reading for personal development. In response to the prompt, "I read for…," subscribers supplied the following answers:

Self care [appears twice]

My sanity! [appears twice]

Balance

A happy brain

Quiet time and wine [see figure 17]

Female empowerment

Hammock time

Reflection

Bliss

The purrfect afternoon [*sic*; a cat was included in the photo]

Me time

Peace

Change

Perspective

Education

Enlightenment

To suggest that readers have a creative potential that needs to be channeled, and to offer a Book of the Month subscription as the outlet for unused creativity reframes the reading life as a catalyst for personal development and growth—the cocktail of luxury and therapy that's come to be associated with "self-care."[109]

Figure 17: A regram from a BOTM subscriber from Houston, Texas. "I Read for Quiet Time with Wine." 2,321 Instagram followers like this.

[109] This is not to say, however, that Book of the Month is a promotional vehicle for self-help literature; not a single self-help book has been featured as a monthly selection.

While self-care has a long history within feminist theory and politics,[110] and is developing an alternate following in positive psychology and wellness literature,[111] the "self-care" experienced by subscribers and promoted by BOTM might be more closely aligned with "me time," an answer provided by one of the other Instagrammers. Indeed, as figure 8's "Quiet Time and Wine"—in a bathtub—suggests, self-care is more closely associated with relaxation, unwinding, and self-indulgence. That is to say, Book of the Month's version of self-care (or, maybe, The Internet's version of self-care[112]) is a lifestyle brand rather than a political struggle or a psychological catharsis. Lifestyle self-care is especially performative—perfect for snapping an Instagram pic; "a person has to be able not only to care for herself but to prove to society that she's doing it," Jordan Kisner wrote about the self-care trend in *The New Yorker*. Other examples include yoga classes, face masks, pedicures, and other such yuppie staples.[113] These examples of self-care (or, shall we say, #selfcare) clearly attest to how far the term has travelled in public discourse since Audre Lorde theorized the concept for women of color; affluent white women and lifestyle brands have co-opted the term, adding a healthy dose of capitalism and neoliberal individualism. "Relaxing" and "unwinding" both imply their opposites; self-care is partly motivated by the desire to attain work/life balance, such that a bath and a good book might

[110] See Sara Ahmed, "Selfcare as Warfare." Ahmed reflects at length on the origins of self-care as a political act as articulated by Audre Lorde in *A Burst of Light*: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Clearly BOTM is uninterested in revolution or political warfare.
[111] See Suzy Reading, *The Self Care Revolution: Smart Habits and Simple Practices that Allow You to Flourish.*
[112] Google reports that the search term "self-care" peaked in 2016, with some attributing the trend's rise to the stress of the 2016 election cycle. See Kisner, Jordan. "The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care." *The New Yorker.*
[113] Kisner.

make one a more efficient worker. ("Balance," too, appeared in subscribers' #IReadFor responses.)

Self-care is particularly important for millennial consumers,[114] jumpstarting a $10 billion dollar industry.[115] As such, the ethos of self-care has become increasingly influential in book marketing, particularly book marketing aimed at women, with startling implications for the fiction enlisted in its name. Reading for pleasure is not a valid pursuit in its own right; pleasure reading is an *indulgent* act, and as such, requires external justification to prop up its existence within neoliberal capitalism. Some of the most common uses for literature include: the development of empathy,[116] stress relief,[117] increased creativity, learning something new, and falling asleep faster. Reading for pleasure is thus valuable if and when it leads to personal development—and if it makes a reader more productive. #selfcare draws on its cousin psychological literature in suggesting that the best forms of self-care are habitual. Self-care should be integrated into a daily routine as habits are more effective than one-time experiences. In other words, for pleasure reading to lead to promote personal growth and development, it must be an ongoing practice—one that is conveniently delivered, say, in monthly increments. The Reading Life, therefore, is one of perpetual self-improvement by way of self-indulgence.

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[114] See Silva, Christianna, "The Millennial Obsession with Self-Care." *NPR* and Aisha Harris, "A History of Self-Care." *Slate.*

[115] See Myers, Lindsay. "The Self Help Industry Helps Itself to Billions of Dollars." *Brain Blogger*. 23 May 2014.

[116] Chiaet's study in *The Scientific American* is frequently linked-to by publishers and Book Blogs when suggesting reading is an important component of self-care and personal growth.

[117] This write-up of a study from the University of Sussex made the Internet rounds. See "Reading 'Can Help Reduce Stress.'"

IV. *Station Eleven* and Socio-Textual Networks

It is in the context of this rebrand that Book of the Month distributed a copy of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* to its subscribers—a community of creative women committed to the luxury of personal growth through pleasure reading. While Book of the Month now provides five options monthly, and allows subscribers to skip months that they do not find appealing, *Station Eleven* was sent to all subscribers to herald the relaunch; all subscribers read the same common text, creating a unified reading community and a consolidated, focused rebranding effort. *Station Eleven* thus served as both an advertisement for Book of the Month, both an example of what subscribers should expect on a monthly basis; not only does the novel help Book of the Month to reimagine itself as a corporation, it also helps subscribers to understand the nature of their BOTM Subscription. Read through the lens of Book of the Month's business plan and branding project, *Station Eleven* functions as an allegory of distribution—and its effects. For *Station Eleven* also prompts a serious reconsideration of Book of the Month as a distributional middleman, considering new, ethically dubious uses of literature in the subscription economy.

It should be said, first, that *Station Eleven* is an ideal Book of the Month selection. Set after a global flu outbreak that destroyed 2/3 of the global population, the novel follows a young actress named Kirsten Raymonde, who travels through the ravaged territory formally known as Michigan, performing Shakespeare with a ragtag theater troupe called the Travelling Symphony. Interspersed are chapters that detail life before the Georgia Flu and in the immediate aftermath, following a set of highly interconnected characters through the processes of oblivion, panic, then grief, as civilization collapses. As a near perfect example of upmarket literary fiction, its language is pitched for the educated, but its

pace seems designed for the particularly busy. Its cover announces it as both a National Book Award finalist and a national bestseller, both a critical and a crowd pleaser. Like many of the other BOTM selections, *Station Eleven* gestures toward contemporary concerns; released not long after the Ebola outbreak of 2014, the apocalyptic Georgia Flu of the novel seems entirely plausible. Subscribers would likely recognize the technological saturation of the pre-flu world, and be equally stunned by the stark contrast of the post-apocalypse's technological desert. Indeed, the book's inside jacket invites readers to imagine themselves in the world of the novel; directly addressing the reader, the cover design asks, "What would you miss most?" Readers imagine themselves as survivors of a Global Apocalypse, just as they are asked to imagine the committed book-lovers who revived Book of the Month as performing the functions of the Traveling Symphony.

Station Eleven formally allegorizes Book of the Month's aims, portraying a network of readers, extended over space and time, united by the books they read. *Station Eleven* offers a vision of reading as a social network; texts, from Shakespeare and the Bible to tabloids and paperback tell-alls, connect communities across space and time. Threading through the novel is *Dear V.: An Unauthorized Portrait of Arthur Leander* (a "number-one best seller"). Composed of letters written by Leander to his friend Victoria, segments of *Dear V* are reproduced within *Station Eleven*, acting as one of many conduits between the novel's temporalities. So, too, is Shakespeare a constant node of connection— whether between Kirsten and her life prior to the Flu (she was performing in a production of *King Lear* opposite Leander during the outbreak), Kirsten and her fellow thespians, and the Symphony and their audiences. Kirsten gives interviews for a fledgling newspaper, the librarian-turned-historian intent on leaving a written record of the aftermath of the flu

(written in his own invented language). And members of the Symphony become poets in their own right, creating a literature of the apocalypse.

At the center of this textual network is the set of graphic novels called *Station Eleven*. Written by a woman named Miranda Carroll before the flu, the graphic novels connect pre- and post-flu world as much as they connect the networks of characters that populate the novel. Miranda gave the graphic novels to her ex-husband, Arthur Leander, an actor. Leander, starring in *King Lear*, gave the comics to a young actress, Kirsten Raymonde. Kirsten eventually becomes a member of the Traveling Symphony after surviving the flu outbreak, and carries the graphic novels with her everywhere; they are her only connection to her life prior to the flu, as well as an imaginary escape. Everywhere she stops, Kirsten searches for some trace of Arthur Leander, who died just prior to the flu outbreak. She searches for tabloids, newspaper articles—any text that might give her a glimpse of a life she barely remembers. Absent another copy of *Station Eleven*, a copy of *Dear V.* would be a real coup; as a young girl, Kirsten was forbidden from reading this book about her co-star, and so she searches for a cast-off copy as she scavenges houses after the Flu. Kirsten ultimately finds another copy of the graphic novel *Station Eleven* in the possession of a deranged prophet who hunts the Symphony—who, as it turns out, was Arthur Leander's son, gifted the only other copy of the bespoke comics. Text unites far-flung characters, creates a community from disparate ages, experiences, times, and spaces. As a novel, *Station Eleven* enacts the Symphony's goals, uniting characters through a shared text. And both *Station Eleven* and its Traveling Symphony enact the goals of Book of the Month, intent on creating a reading community.

No "Read. Love. Repeat.," the Traveling Symphony's slogan is no less catchy. "Because Survival is Insufficient" is painted on each of their wagons, and tattooed on Kirsten's arm. The Symphony is convinced that artistic experience makes the difference between mere survival and a meaningful life. In part, the Symphony is committed to sharing this conviction with their audience across the territory formerly known as Michigan. The Symphony is so committed to this mission at great personal risk.

> "Sometimes the Traveling Symphony thought that what they were doing was noble. There were moments around campfires when someone would say something invigorating about the importance of art, and everyone would find it easier to sleep that night. At other times it seemed a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it, especially at times when they had to camp between towns, when they were turned away at gunpoint from hostile places, when they were traveling in snow or rain through dangerous territory, actors and musicians carrying guns and crossbows, the horses exhaling great clouds of steam, times when they were cold and afraid and their feet were wet" (118).

A group of devoted thespians and musicians, the Traveling Symphony is genuine in their desire to cultivate artistic appreciation in a decimated landscape and in their belief that Shakespeare might remind survivors of their humanity. Like evangelists, the Symphony is not motivated by personal devotion alone, but by the need to make converts—to convince survivors that they do, in fact, need art in their hardscrabble lives. Mega-corporations may rise and fall, but art remains thanks to the devoted few, committed to its legacy. The Traveling Symphony is a perfect vehicle through which a once-dominant

book club can imagine its reinvention. A number of the promotional articles detailing BOTM's relaunch seem to tell just this story: "The iconic, 90 year-old club was nearly dead when a group of book lovers stepped in to give it new life. Here's how they did it," reads one click-bait headline. The desire to make disciples from their audience is not dissimilar from the need to turn Instagram followers into subscribers, and to optimize the lifetime value of subscribers. And like the "book lovers" that re-started Book of the Month, those committed few, the Traveling Symphony believes strongly in their cause. They are also seasoned professionals. Most members of the Symphony are not merely performing a public service; they are continuing their pre-Flu work. The Symphony is comprised of a military orchestra who chose to continue traveling and playing with one another; they joined up with a theater troupe that was on tour in Chicago, and made the same decision. Kirsten was a professional actor prior to joining the Symphony. The Symphony members are thus continuing their life's work, ever more convinced of the necessity of art for more than mere survival. Presumably, when turned away at gunpoint or exhausted from life on the road, the Symphony takes personal satisfaction in their cultural ambassadorship, motivated by more than the meager applause of their scattered and preoccupied audience. Whether committed to their collective personal development or committed to the spread of artistic beauty, however, the show must go on. And even if the audience only provides external justification for their performance, it is clear that the Symphony is deeply invested in their audience's response: both entertainment and escape.

The Symphony clearly calibrates their offerings based on their audience's desires. In addition to performing "classical, jazz, orchestral arrangements of pre-collapse pop music" (37), they'd experimented with different types of dramatic performances before settling

squarely on Shakespeare. “They’d performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what on one would have anticipated, was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical audiences.” In the spirit of failing better, one of the Symphony members explains, “People want what was best about the world” (38). While the Symphony is committed to high-quality literature, they are also particularly attentive to their audience’s tastes and desires. Instead of “best” by another measure—Brecht or Beckett, say—the Symphony chooses work that is both timeless *and* accessible. (So accessible, they even deliver door-to-door.)

Self-care seems an inappropriate lexicon to describe an audience composed of pandemic-survivors. Entertainment, a break in the drudgery of mere survival—these descriptors seem more apt for watching a play after the apocalypse. Yet, the Symphony is particularly aware of the effect they have on the audience, providing an escape inasmuch as providing access to quality entertainment, or “what was best about the world.” Concerned with more than the audience’s pleasure, the Symphony is attentive to the therapeutic outcomes of their performance; they make artistic choices in the service of these desired compensatory effects, making do with what little they are able to scavenge and repurpose. For Oberon, “a tuxedo that Kirsten had found in a dead man’s closet near the town of East Jordan,” and for Titania, “a wedding dress that [Kirsten] had scavenged from a house near New Petoskey, the chiffon and silk streaked with shades of blue from a child’s water-color kit” (57).

> “What the Symphony was doing, what they were always doing, was trying to cast a spell, and costuming helped; the lives they brushed up against were work-worn and difficult, people who spent all their time engaged in the tasks

> of survival. A few actors thought Shakespeare would be more relatable if they dressed in the same patched and faded clothing their audience wore, but Kirsten thought it meant something to see Titania in a gown, Hamlet in a shirt and tie" (150).

Kirsten's costuming pays particular attention to the difficulty of the audience's lives—work-worn, difficult lives, consumed with simply surviving—and the way that the Symphony's work might ameliorate their pain. Casting a spell through the reliance on both visual cues (costuming) as well as the play itself, the Symphony strives to create a fully transportive and immersive experience for their audience, transporting them not only from post- to pre-apocalypse, but to a world that might not be defined by cataclysm. Kirsten trades on both memory and relatability for their theatrical effects. A 21st century shirt and tie would be as out-of-place on a gentleman from Verona as would be the makeshift style of the Georgia Flu. That is, it is precisely because these costumes are relatable that they are able to do creative and transportive work—a gown "means something." This disorienting effect—placing players neither in the Renaissance nor in the immediate time of the Georgia Flu, even while remaining tied to both—gestures outside of a world of apocalyptic inevitability. In this context, the Symphony's performances are a luxury, of sorts—at the very least, something more than survival alone. The Traveling Symphony provides the luxury of escape—the beautiful rather than the utilitarian, setting the imagination to something other than functional survival.

Mere survival, however, is not a product of the Post-Flu world alone. Many of the pre-flu narratives depict people searching for meaning in their work, and failing to find it: actor Arthur Leander, his best friend Clark (erstwhile actor and now management

consultant), and his ex-wife Miranda (author of *Station Eleven* graphic novels) find themselves merely surviving in their respective professional and personal lives, adapting the mannerisms of what Clark rather moralistically called "iPhone zombies" and "high-functioning sleepwalkers." While conducting an executive review, Clark is struck by the candor of his interviewee, who tells him, "it's like the corporate world's full of ghosts… I'm talking about these people who've ended up in one life instead of another and they are just so disappointed." (165-66). Clark identifies with his interviewee's words, and considers his own corporate life:

> "He *had* been sleepwalking, Clark realized, moving half-asleep through the motions of his life for a while now, years; not specifically unhappy, but when had he last found real joy in his work? When was the last time he'd been truly moved by anything? When had he last felt awe or inspiration?" (166).

What begins as a question about joyless work quickly shifts to a question about Clark's creative interior life—feeling moved, awed, inspired. Though this interview was conducted prior to the Georgia Flu outbreak, though they are ensconced in a well-appointed high-rise, though they are well fed, clothed, and unlikely to be held at gunpoint, Clark typifies sort of mere survival that the arts are meant to complicate and enrich.

While perhaps BOTM subscribers would not identify with the Flu survivors, they can certainly see something of themselves in Clark—or, at least, the iPhone zombies that curmudgeonly Clark confronts on the subway. The Georgia Flu is, in many ways, a red herring in *Station Eleven*; the critique of sleepwalking underpins much of the novel, from Clark's confession to Kirsten's descriptions of "walking" for all of Year One after the outbreak, and retaining no memory of the experience. If the direct address on the book's

cover ("what would you miss?") asks readers to imagine their life post-Flu, then the narrative flashbacks that pepper the novel ask readers to reflect on the state of their own interior lives, considering whether or not they might, also, need a monthly jolt of creativity delivered to their doorstep.

Clark survives the Georgia Flu outbreak. While the Traveling Symphony administers Shakespeare as a prophylactic against mere survival in the post-Flu world, Clark turns to another longstanding cultural institution as way of bringing beauty into the world. Stranded in an airport during the Flu, now a happy resident of the Terminal C SkyMiles Lounge, Clark becomes founding curator of the Museum of Civilization. He collects dead technologies—cell phones, handheld video games, laptops, but also stilettos, credit cards, electric guitars. Though the world has nearly ended, Clark finds ways to busy himself in his work. He formalizes the museum, creating placards to interpret each of the items for the visits he welcomes; he spends years searching the airport for accouterments to appropriately display his artifacts. He acts as a docent as well as curator, giving tours, sharing his memories with those too young to remember the world before the Flu and those born after the outbreak. While Clark has found a richer interior life through creativity, he has channeled that energy back into a profession, traditionally conceived. Creativity makes him a better worker—more productive and reliant on productivity as the source of personal fulfillment. Though Clark collects money and credit cards and other remnants of capitalism, his days remain structured by work.

But good news for book lovers! There are no books in the Museum of Civilization, because there doesn't need to be. The Museum of Civilization collects dead technologies, but books are very much alive after the Georgia Flu. Books are everywhere, from the dog-

eared copies of *King Lear* that the Symphony carries, to the volumes of poetry that Kirsten scavenges from an empty house, to the Old Testament that inspires a doomsday cult, to the copies of *Station Eleven* graphic novels that she cherishes. Books outlive the iPad, the Kindle, and every other technology that once supposedly hastened the book's demise.

When Clark is not in his Museum, he occupies the defunct air control tower, providing him a literal 360° view of the territory surrounding the airport. This sort of surveillance suits Clark; in his pre-Flu life, Clark was a management consultant, responsible for conducting what they called "360° executive reviews." While surveying the territory, Clark spots what appears to be electricity in the distance, and sends the Symphony to investigate. The Symphony is one of the only groups that regularly moves through the Territory (along with traders and other salespeople); travel is deemed unsafe, and so survivors have turned to settlement. The Symphony uses music to assuage settlers' fears of newcomers by sending one of the trumpets ahead, heralding their arrival with a Vivaldi concerto; they are invited, willingly, into towns and homes because they provide a welcome service to those they meet. As such, the Symphony becomes an important conduit for circulating news—and, like Book of the Month, collecting data about their audience. The Symphony travels from town to town along a relatively circumscribed route through what was once the state of Michigan, never stepping outside of their regular territory; it takes them approximately two-years to complete their route on foot. They return to the same towns many times over, cultivating friendships (informants, rather) and taking note of the changes that have occurred in their absence. Returning to a town called St.-Deborah-by-the-Water, Kirsten notes, "the last time she'd been here, the IHOP had housed three or four families; she was surprised to see that it had been boarded up… The presence of an armed

guard in the middle of town suggested the place was unsafe—had they recently been raided? … It didn't quite make sense" (49). More than simply remarking on such changes, Kirsten shares the data that she gathers with neighboring towns, treating such information as a commodity that can also be traded. The intensity of the surveillance can, on one hand, be attributed to the Symphony's military roots. In addition to the constant vigilance of the Symphony members, we learn that the Conductor has instituted a thorough and complex process of keeping watch at night, as well as separation and scouting protocols. In other words, Kirsten's process of observation is more than just training from a life on the road; it is a systematic, methodical program of surveillance and reconnaissance on which the Symphony depends for survival—and for sharing crucial information with allies.

One of the many intertexts in *Station Eleven* is an interview that Kirsten conducted with François Diallo, a man who has become an archivist and historian as well as a librarian and founding editor of *The New Petoskey News*. François asks Kirsten about her travels, saying, "If you were to talk about the other towns you've passed through, that would count as news to us. […] most people don't leave their towns anymore. I think my readers will be interested in hearing from people who've been to other places since the collapse" (108). Their interview proceeds:

> DIALLO: The other towns you pass through, are they very different from here?
>
> RAYMONDE: The places we return to more than once aren't dissimilar to here. Some places, you pass through once and never return, because you can tell something's very wrong. Everyone's afraid, or it seems like some people have enough to eat and other people are starving, or you see pregnant eleven-year-olds

> and you know the place is either lawless or in the grip of something, a cult of some kind. There are towns that are perfectly reasonable, logical systems of governance and such, and then you pass through two years later and they've slid into disarray. All towns have their own traditions. There are towns like this one, where you're interested in the past, you've got a library […] Other towns, discussion of the past is discouraged. […] Some towns are easier to visit than others. Some places have elected mayors or they're run by elected committees. Sometimes a cult takes over and those towns are the most dangerous […] they're unpredictable. You can't argue with them, because they live by an entirely different logic. You come to a town where everyone's dressed all in white, for example. I'm thinking of a town we visited once just outside our usual territory, north of Kincardine, and they tell you that they were saved from the Georgia Flu and survived the collapse because they're superior people and free from sin.

Kirsten's audience doesn't know that they are being watched as closely as they are watching the players. Yet, the Symphony's surveillance is nearly total. It helps them make choices about their travel routes and their performances, even while it accords them a substantial amount of power vis-a-vis otherwise unknown information to far-flung communities.

Through surveillance, these cultural products—whether Shakespeare or museum—are meant to provide discipline and (ostensibly) security in a new society inasmuch as they are designed to provide a luxurious distraction. In this way, *Station Eleven* serves to justify the project of surveillance that Book of the Month undertakes through their social media management. For Kirsten and the Travelling Symphony, data collection has an ethical, even

moral, imperative. Practically, the Symphony can adjust their route, choose their performances appropriately, rely on food and sustenance from the towns that they know are safe and loyal consumers of their artistic goods. But this data collection also serves to police the preponderance of unlawful and fanatical behavior, alerting towns to neighboring impulses in radicalization, militarization, and abuse. Any questionable observation and reportage by Kirsten and Symphony members—any violation of privacy, any nonconsensual investigation—is justified by the greater good of "survival," even while papered over through the promotion of cultural good.

Despite the plain allegorical reading of *Station Eleven* as a fictional account of Book of the Month's self-imagination, it remains a somewhat odd choice for a first selection. Or, at least, its selection is a prime example of selective reading (at best), willful misreading (at worst). Inasmuch as the novel reflects the values of Book of the Month, it should also prompt us to reflect on the company's ethical choices. *Station Eleven* is a signal example of cli-fi, a branch of science fiction particularly invested in climate change; Book of the Month is less than interested in this reading, it would seem, given the size of SubCom's carbon footprint.[118] Moreover, the Traveling Symphony's position as both cultural ambassadors *and* reconnaissance outfit suggests a more insidious implication of Book of the Month's emphasis on community-building and its position as a distributional middleman. Once we begin to pursue the thread of Book of the Month's most profitable resource—namely,

[118] A number of Subscription Boxes (particularly Meal Kits) have come under heavy criticism for the amount of waste that they produce and the carbon emissions that accompany shipping. See: http://observer.com/2017/04/packaging-waste-blue-apron-meal-kits/Even still, SaaS and cloud-based platforms can often be worse for the environment; centrally-located server farms consume vast amounts of energy, to say nothing of the energy consumed by individual subscribers when they access those servers. For commentary on server farms, see Ucilia Wang, "How the Netflix Model Impacts the Environment, Economy, and Society."

subscriber data—it becomes clear that the cuteness of the BOTM packaging, the company's feminine personification, and its insistence on a relational transaction all serve to disarm subscribers, convincing them that their personal data is worth surrendering.

V. Book of the Month and the *Other* Big Five

Big data is the backbone of all subscription companies, and Book of the Month is no exception. *Station Eleven*'s fusion of artistic distribution and surveillance provides, in fact, a prescient reading of the perils of the Subscription Economy. By way of conclusion, I want to turn to Book of the Month's position as a middleman within the *other* Big Five—not the megacorporations of international publishing world, but the erstwhile startups of Silicon Valley: Google, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon. While BOTM's public image may be disarming in its cuteness and comforting in its luxury, their reliance on data mining is a particularly alarming as a harbinger for the publishing industry, and for literature of the 21st century.

Subscription companies rely on subscriber information in order to create customized subscriber experiences and to make data-drive decisions about consumer behaviors. The opportunity to develop a data-driven business model is one of the major selling points for entrepreneurs considering SubCom, and one reason why so many companies are adopting a subscription model. Tien Tzuo, CEO of Zuora (a company that provides software for subscription companies), argues that "Subscriber Identity" is key for a successful subscription business. "It is now insufficient to maintain customer records that include only contact information such as name, phone, email address, etc. A 'subscriber identity record' must include purchases, products, local pricing, promotions, payment

history, refund history, renewal value, usage metrics and much more," Tzuo argues.[119] He proposes, instead, that subscription-based companies adopt a variety of new methods in order to both monitor subscriber health and to deliver more customized, individually tailored experience.

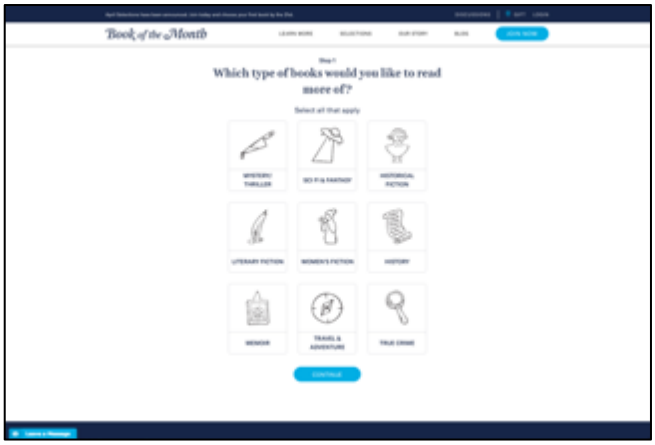
And subscribers are willing to go along. Customization is a major selling point for subscribers. McKinsey consultancy reports that subscribers to Discovery boxes, "expect personalized subscriptions to become more tailored over time: 28 percent of both groups said that a personalized experience was the most important reason for continuing to subscribe."[120] Customization is clearly a significant draw for subscribers; it makes the subscriber far more personal, and keeps subscribers happy. Writing for *Forbes*, Richard Kestenbaum notes, "Consumers will give up personal information if they think they'll get a better experience for it." Having subscribed, consumers will continue to provide data that will increase the customized experience that they receive; subscribers are not only a continuous revenue source, but they are also a continuous data source.

Given Book of the Month's emphasis on reading as an act of creative self-care, it seems only reasonable that they provide their subscribers opportunities to customize their experience based upon both their reading tastes and their lifestyle needs. Prior to choosing a subscription plan or entering a credit card numbers, potential subscribers are asked to provide data about their reading habits. The goal, we are told, is to provide a more personalized reading experience. Yet, this reasoning rings hollow: Book of the Month has done its market research, and selects five books each month that are suitable to their target

[119] Tzuo, Tien. "The Subscription Economy: A Business Transformation."
[120] Chen, Tony, Ken Fenyo, Sylvia Yang, and Jessica Zhang. "Thinking inside the subscription box: New research on e-commerce consumers."

demographic; subscribers can choose which book they want to read, or can pass on a book. "Personalization," then, is built into a BOTM experience, but the onus on the subscriber to select books she will enjoy. Nonetheless, Book of the Month knows that they key to SubCom is personalization and data collection, and so the on-boarding process begins by asking subscribers, "Which books would you like to read more of?" from a grid of nine choices: mystery/thriller, sci fi & fantasy, historical fiction, literary fiction, women's fiction, history, memoir, travel & adventure, and true crime (see figure 18).

Figure 18: Screenshot of Book of the Month's customization process during subscriber onboarding.



As with any business plan, reading can be maximized, scaled up ("more of"). It also presumes that readers *already* have distinct tastes and preferences; while subscribers may be interested in reading something new, Book of the Month wants to know about existing tastes. Readers are then asked to designate the approximate number of books that they read monthly, from "less than one" to "5+". The presumption is that the subscriber is *already* reading, *already* enjoying the activity, and already reading at a relatively quick pace, with "less than one" being the smallest monthly unit available in question two. (*Not* zero.)

It is clear that this data might help Book of the Month to personalize the subscriber experience, and subscribers would likely part with this information willingly even if

attentive to the larger data-mining aims. But this is only one (exceedingly direct) way that Book of the Month gathers information about subscribers. Book of the Month has neatly positioned themselves between publisher and reader, suggesting that they are an underdog's alternative to one industry Goliath: Amazon.com. During their relaunch, BOTM representatives constantly referenced the overwhelming qualities of Amazon, casting the internet megastore as the baddie with which thoughtful readers and consumers must contend. In an interview about the relaunch, Bookspan CEO John Lippman offered a typical characterization: "With Amazon's dominance, the [relaunch] was clearly going to be challenging. But what I thought was interesting was that […] Amazon is not a very good place to discover what you will like. I saw the opportunity to redo Book of the Month in a way that would make it relevant again."[121] Yet, while Book of the Month might position themselves *against* Amazon, they are clearly aligned with another of Silicon Valley's Big Five in their process of data collection: Facebook.

As I have shown, Book of the Month relies almost exclusively on Instagram for advertising, and involves users in the process of building and developing ad campaigns. In 2012, Facebook acquired Instagram in a $1 billion acquisition; while Instagram was barely profitable in 2012, with just 30 fulltime employees and 30 million users. After Facebook's acquisition Instagram grew to 500 million daily active users and is estimated to be worth over $102 billion, approximately 15% of Facebook's total revenue. This growth can be primarily attributed to Instagram's post-acquisition decision to open the platform to targeted advertising in September of 2015—a policy change that has dramatically benefitted Book of the Month. COO Sheryl Sandberg has noted, "Combined, Facebook and

[121] Feldman, Amy. "Book Of The Month Reinvents As A Subscription Box Business For Millennial Women."

Instagram own more than one out of every five minutes you spend on a mobile phone. Together we're the best ad platform by far." It is not hard to imagine how exposure of this magnitude would benefit a book club. Instagram ads work just like Facebook ads, the 2015 Press Release was keen to note. "Like Facebook ads, Instagram ads feature photos or videos and *use Facebook targeting*" (emphasis mine).[122] This allows for very targeted advertising—well-educated, city-dwelling women in their 20s and 30s, say—as well as access to Facebook analytics about those consumers that an ad may reach.

While Book of the Month's Instagram campaigns generate subscriber participation, promotes customer loyalty, and increase brand awareness, they also harvest a host of personal data—all freely given by Instagrammers. From user-generated photos alone, Book of the Month can learn about what motivates subscribers to read; if the "hipstery café" is geotagged, BOTM can learn about where subscribers read. Perhaps they learn about other products the BOTM subscriber enjoys: bedroom furniture from West Elm, for instance, or a particular vintage of rosé. In other words, in simple photos, Book of the Month gains access to a wealth of information about subscriber location, taste, purchasing preferences. While these data points are perhaps useful to Book of the Month, they can be combined with a host of other data points in order to make countless statistical inferences about a consumer's behavior, all compiled into proprietary "psychography" dossiers by major data analytics and consumer profiling firms.

This is exceedingly useful consumer data, particularly important for the book publishing industry. Publishing traditionally has been data poor. As John B. Thompson notes, sales data is notoriously unreliable in the publishing industry: point of sale

[122] See Instagram's business portal for a description of targeted ads and consumer analytics

information collected by Neilson BookScan only reports the numbers of individuals that *purchased* a book, providing very little data on the individuals that read the book—to say nothing of what passages they enjoyed most, where their attention flagged, or the pace at which they read a book.[123] This lack of data analysis has long plagued the publishing industry, and partly contributed to the demise of Janice Radway's Club. One of the shortcomings that Radway identifies in *A Feeling for Books* is the relative lack of data that Book of the Month collected about its subscribers. Book of the Month 2.0 has clearly learned their lesson, and are not only collecting data about subscribers, but are taking advantage of an opportunity afforded them by their middleman status.

Subscriptions provide companies steady and predictable revenue streams; this is only partly due to timed monthly deliveries. Another regular and popular source of revenue for SubCom is subscriber data. That is to say, many Subscription Companies have become data brokers in their own right. Tim Sarapani, former attorney for the ACLU and Director of Public Policy for Facebook describes the situation rather bleakly: "Most retailers are finding out that they have a secondary source of income, which is that the data about their customers is probably just about as valuable, maybe even more so, than the actual product or service that they're selling to the individual. So, there's a whole new revenue stream that many companies have found." While standard retail outlets routinely proffer their user data to third-party vendors, Subscription businesses are at a particular advantage, given their emphasis on subscriber customization, working with organizations such as Slice Marketing to turn subscriber profiles into consumer and market research (or, in the infamous and still-unfolding case of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, into targeted

[123] See Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*.

political infowars). Data brokerage is a mutli-billion dollar industry that relies on mobile apps, social media (like Instagram and Facebook), and other user information. In this context, Book of the Month not only benefits from Facebook's targeted analytics; they also close the feedback loop by providing key subscriber information to their Big Five (publishing) partners.

The mining and selling of data remains almost entirely unregulated in the United States.[124] Even so, Book of the Month does not mislead subscribers, directly or indirectly, about the uses to which their data is put. Book of the Month discloses their data mining practices in their privacy statements, mitigating their liability. BOTM's privacy policy clearly states, "We may share your personally identifiable information with third parties for their marketing purposes," and,

> Any communication or material you post on the Site by electronic mail or otherwise, including any data, questions, comments, suggestions, or the like is, and will be treated as, non-confidential and non-proprietary. Anything you transmit or post may be used by *Book of the Month* or its affiliates for any purpose, including but not limited to, reproduction, disclosure, transmission, publication, broadcast and posting. *Book of the Month* is free to use any ideas, concepts, know-how or techniques contained in any communication you send to the Site for any purpose whatsoever including, but not limited to, developing, manufacturing and marketing products using such information.

Subscribers are given an opportunity to opt-out, to make sure that their information is not shared, though the process is rather cumbersome. Yet, the effects that Book of the

[124] See Isaac and Lohr, "Service Faces a Backlash for Selling Personal Data." *The New York Times*.

Month generates through their branding—trust, warm-heartedness, affinity— are particularly useful in convincing subscribers not to read too closely, while the disarming cuteness of the packaging effaces the real, bigger business of Book of the Month as a distributional middleman. Book of the Month subscribers do not purchase books, they subscribe to the experience of reading; yet, this experience ensure that they are under constant surveillance, that books become tools in the shady dealings of data brokers.

Big data of this variety helps distributors become incredibly smart, data-driven producers. The case of Netflix is instructive: Netflix began collecting subscriber data to make recommendations about other films or shows that a viewer might enjoy. Now, that data powers Netflix's production company. Netflix's model allows them to determine precisely when a subscriber loses interest in *The Crown* or *House of Cards*—not just the season or the episode or the scene, but the *frame*; all of this data powers their production company. This is not production by committee or focus group, but production by big data. Amazon, likewise, has proceeded down this path. Kindle data—vigilantly kept under lock and key—is no doubt useful in such data-driven writing; as Mark McGurl has shown, Amazon monetizes their data analytics platforms via Kindle Direct Publishing, with countless ebooks designed to help smart, data-savvy writers create their own breakout hit, in the vein of Hugh Howey's *Wool*.[125] It is unclear whether Book of the Month has any desire to become a publisher, or produce literature-to-order via their data analytic systems. Currently, the company contracts with authors and publishers to release exclusive titles, either as gifts with purchase, as a monthly selection, or as an extra that might entice more

[125] See McGurl, "Everything and Less."

subscribers to join. But Book of the Month seems to be going the way of the data broker: tracking user data and selling it to the highest third-party bidder.

I began this chapter by arguing that, just as Radway's Club was a synechdoche of the process of conglomeration, Book of the Month 2.0 is emblematic of the state of contemporary publishing, and I am afraid that I have painted a rather bleak picture. I have argued that it is the condition of contemporary literature that the data around texts becomes the data within texts. While middlemen like the literary agent or systems like comparative titles may increase this tendency, distributors like Book of the Month make this process their business, providing the means by which contemporary literature is produced via predictive data analytics. The Creative Prosumer that BOTM relies upon as a core subscriber becomes a useful point of data for a publishing industry desperate to learn more about book-buyers, to stay relevant, and to continue to be profitable in the data-deluge of the contemporary, while the reading life is monetized beyond the simple product of a hardcover book. I have shown that Book of the Month 2.0 capitalizes on the narratives of #selfcare, community building, and creativity in order to ameliorate subscribers' fears about the potential uses of data that they surrender.

It is unlikely that Book of the Month 2.0 proposes a viable future for distributing literature for multimedia conglomerates. Their business model is firmly dependent on the existence and success of the monoliths. But in Book of the Month 2.0, we begin to glimpse, I think, the problems with which publishing must contend: not only the low-low prices of Amazon.com, but also the challenge of knowing and understanding their consumers—what and how and why they read. And, as the case of Book of the Month demonstrates, industry bureaucrats—agents, editors, authors, and distributors—become increasingly significant in

this project, negotiating not only between artist and corporation, but between producers and consumers. More than mere go-betweens, these middlemen are creative collaborators, helping to shape the novel for the 21st century. *Middlemen: Making Literature in the Age of Multimedia Conglomerates* has argued that we must give these figures their due if we are to appropriately understand the literature of the contemporary—and, indeed the literature of the future. Scholars of contemporary literature must remain attentive to the economic workings of the literary field broadly, and to the increasing aesthetic influence that is enjoyed by the corporations that produce contemporary literature. If the fate of the novel in the 21st century is being determined in a boardroom, then to the boardroom we must go.

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