theories and methodologies

Books on the Move

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LONDON, JUNE 2014. I'M QUEUING OUTSIDE A DOWNTOWN CHURCH BEHIND A SIX-FOOT-TALL MAN WHOSE NECK JUTS INTO MY VIEW EVERY TIME the lights change at the corner. He's craning for a white van whose walls are lined with hardcovers and paperbacks. Its sponsor, the Quaker Homeless Action Committee, helps readers who are sleeping rough reclaim a right that many citizens take for granted: book borrowing.

Literacy is only one of the preconditions for acquiring a public library card. Another is something to write on the address line. As the reader ahead of me explains, even scrounging up a relative's or friend's address doesn't make public libraries hospitable to homeless borrowers. Life on the street lacks the predictability of a four-week loan period. Books get wet, get lost, get stolen. Networks formal and informal respond to that problem: day centers improvise a shelf or two where books can be taken and left; readers alert one another to curbs across which evicted textbooks sprawl every June.

The QHA Mobile Library faces different logistical challenges. The finance boom that has placed London rents out of reach has also clogged the city's streets with Range Rovers whose owners don't balk at congestion charges. Hanging around while the van fights traffic has an upside, though. Just as people in waiting rooms form a captive audience for trashy magazines, so people standing in line are generous about talking to a researcher. The wait gives me time to notice that, unlike in the classrooms I inhabit, the expectant readers are all male.

People who care about the feel and smell of old-fashioned print skew upmarket. You are more likely to be a reverse snob who treasures thumbing through the crumbling volumes that Charles Lamb termed "ragged veterans" if you can slough off the dust in a hot shower (46). This doesn't mean that the readers waiting for the van are indifferent to the material attributes of books. On the contrary, no one cares more about form factor than travelers, whether in an airport lounge or a soup kitchen. That may be why Allen Lane launched Penguin paperbacks in railway stations and why Amazon

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sets Kindle ads in bed, bath, and beyond, the beyond usually consisting of a beach or a poolside lounger. The ragged veteran standing behind me, on the lookout for books about Afghanistan, tells me that hardbacks, for which owners of bookcases are willing to pay a premium, lie at the bottom of his wish list. If you have no bedside table, toilet top, or desk, clothbound volumes look like a grotesque design failure: heavy to hoist onto your back, unwieldy to cram in a repurposed shopping cart, more vulnerable than even a person is to the lightest rain shower. Project Gutenberg downloads, in contrast, don't weigh you down, and old-model smartphones without a SIM card can be found for cheap. A built-in light source aids more than reading: the medium of enlightenment doubles as a flashlight.

Householders indiscriminately uncluttering their bookshelves are out of luck: the Mobile Library rejects home improvement guides (for obvious reasons), romance novels (most patrons are male), picture books (no coffee table to rest them on), and travel books (since their readers' mobility relies on different information networks). To the right and the left of the white van, though, reading material of other kinds abounds. A block west, a barbershop offers magazines and macchiatos while you wait for your detoxing towel to be infused with essential oils. Across the street, a store window stenciled "App-artament" diagrams washers, dryers, and furnaces remotely controlled from a tenant's smartphone. A few product cycles later, the phone may find its way into the pocket of someone evicted so that digitally tended apartments can be built.

Reading is most commonly learned in the classroom, whether in K–12 schools, targeted by the Common Core standards, or in college literature departments, where *reading* is as likely to be a noun as a verb. But learning to read also means learning where to find the preconditions of literacy: a supply of printed or digital matter (a challenge to which the Mobile Library rises as resourcefully as does Project Gutenberg); a supply of human beings to curate, catalog, store, and retrieve it (for libraries as for individuals, acquiring a book is the least of the costs associated with it); a place in which to consume it (lit, dry, safe from theft and ideally from distraction); and other readers with whom to compare notes and exchange recommendations. A Victorian essayist is typical in asserting that anyone who thinks back to the book most formative in childhood "will surely find that the book thus influential came to him by a sort of chance, through no act of authority or intention" (Mozley 195). But no reader is self-made, and the library rebuts as strongly as the classroom Margaret Thatcher's denial that there is such a thing as society.

I came to the Mobile Library while exploring the hopes and fears with which printed books are invested at a moment of rapid technological change. Why do people care whether they or others read print? What's at stake when we fret, fume, or gush about the present and future state of reading? My research led me both to readers and, at a second remove, to what Deborah Brandt has called "sponsors of literacy": "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy" (19). She might have been speaking of the volunteers who ferry books through London traffic. The age of multimedia devices has spawned a new breed of booklover—zealots whose identities derive not only from what they read but also from the format in which they read it. For them, reading and owning and distributing "tree flakes encased in dead cow" is more than Colonial Williamsburg–style reenactment (Mitchell 56). They devote their lives to rescuing certain objects, the experiences that they associate with those objects, and the self fueled by those experiences.

Passionate readers are rarely content to read: most have strong feelings about whether and what the people around them read. In

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Massachusetts, whose founders wanted all settlers to be literate (though not always to be able to write), reading remains a missionary faith. This 23 April found me lugging a crate of books around the Boston subway. My guide was a former student of mine who marks Shakespeare's birthday by handing out free copies of a novel with a movie tie-in—in this case a young-adult book, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. I'd wanted my own copy to take home but was out of luck. World Book Night, the now defunct organization that sponsored her efforts, allowed volunteers to give copies only to "infrequent readers," meaning people for whom a giveaway isn't redundant. The student knew that her English professor didn't fit that description, but what about the sea of faces streaming past us on the platform? Consider what observations you'd use to profile an infrequent reader, and you begin to glimpse the challenges facing a secular Gideon.

Sponsors of literacy have often done double duty policing its uses. The accessibility of the first public libraries prompted inventors to develop "book disinfectors" that shielded middle-class patrons from the germs of dirtier borrowers. A "metal fumigator made from 16th wire gauge sheet iron, with angle iron door-supports and side-shelf rests" provided antivirus hardware for the trashy novels favored by convalescent girls (Greenwood 494–95). Communication with authors' minds needed to be disentangled from pages tainted with communicable diseases. Charles Dickens's democratic hope that the cheap edition of *Dombey and Son* would "be well thumbed and soiled in a plain suit that will bear a great deal, by children and grown people, at the fireside and on the journey: to be hoarded on the humble shelf where there are few books, and to lie about in libraries like any familiar piece of household stuff that is easy of replacement" (438–39) finds its mirror image in Marie Corelli's rant that "to borrow one's mental fare from Free Libraries is a dirty habit. . . . The true lover of books will never want to peruse volumes that are *thumbed and soiled* by hundreds of other *hands* . . . messy *knockabout volumes*, which many of our medical men assure us carry disease-germs in their too-frequently *fingered* pages" (9). What poisoned readers were no longer ideas but objects.

Now the books once thought to kill are tasked with curing: the latest organization to endorse reading is Britain's National Health Service. Its program Books on Prescription allows doctors to dispense self-help books whose mental-health effects have been established through randomized trials (Price). When the marquis de Sade headed *La philosophie dans le boudoir* with the motto "La mère en prescrira la lecture à sa fille" ("the mother will prescribe its reading to her daughter"), he was riffing on the commonplace warning "La mère en proscrira la lecture à sa fille" ("the mother will proscribe its reading to her daughter" [Ladenson 60]). Medical systems put Sade's joke into practice not just by prescribing particular books but by defining print reading as therapeutic.

Or even soporific. At a reading group on a London housing estate, a sixty-something participant told me that she'd never had time for fiction until her doctor blamed her insomnia on late-night screen time: she had joined the book club to force herself to substitute a bedside incandescent for her smartphone and television. Many of those smartphone screens now display headlines such as "Reading an iPad or a Kindle before bed instead of a printed book can cause sleep deprivation and increase the risk of cancer, scientists have warned" (Kirk)—this one reporting on a study that correlated the use of both devices with lower levels of melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleepiness and whose absence correlates with breast, bowel, and prostate cancer. A finer-grained study, however, revealed that when participants did their bedtime reading on an iPad, melatonin levels rose more slowly than they did when either a

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printed book or a nonbacklit Kindle was read by the glow of an old-fashioned lightbulb.[1] The two studies didn't control for genre or length of text: their experimental design focused on the medium to the exclusion of the message.

One could, of course, advise insomniacs to ease themselves into bedtime through some activity unrelated to reading—knitting, say, or meditating with the lights off. The assumption that pages will most effectively crowd out screens recasts in a somatic language the anti-Sabbatarian activist John Lilwall's 1856 moral warning: "Shut [working men] out of the reading room and the lecture hall, and it is all but certain they will rush to the tavern, seeking relief in the pipe and stimulating glass" (17). Victorian teetotalers supported the public library in the hope that it would draw working-class men away from the other place where you could find shelter, warmth, and news: the pub. To the screen's heroin, the book is methadone—or melatonin.

Unlike most social services, the Mobile Library remains as free from prescription as from proscription: it seeks to fulfill its patrons' desires, not to mold them. Yet the white van delivers more than books, providing occasions to discuss, to recommend, and to exchange opinions along with objects. Learning to read doesn't just mean gaining a cognitive skill; it also means finding reasons to exercise that skill, places and times in which it can be exercised, and a language in which to describe the pleasures and pains of reading. The classroom is only one of the many backdrops against which those dramas unfold.

Although book prescription and libraries both funnel government funds to books, there the similarity ends. One operates at the level of individual health, the other civic. A functioning democracy needs not just readers but also borrowers who handle books that have been or will be handled by fellow citizens. Lamb praised pages worn thin by a single user's thumb, too beloved to be resold or pawned except in the direst need (46). In contrast, the public library, established in Britain by the 1850 Public Libraries Act, enshrines pages prethumbed by a different reader and soon to be rethumbed by a third. Bookhandling becomes an act of communion, like breaking bread or passing around a joint.[2] By taking books to readers rather than waiting for readers to come to books, bookmobiles court the promiscuity that book disinfectors ward off. In both cases, the medium is part of the message.

The circulation desk, in short, forms a populist shrine. The American library reformer Melvil Dewey compared "itinerant libraries" with "gospel tents": in a 1901 paean to libraries transported by rail, he exulted that once "the cheapness and quickness of modern methods of communication" make books "grow wings," words "which were thought to belong like trees in one place may travel about like birds" (8–9).[3] Calling "the traveling book . . . the precursor of the traveling library," Dewey contrasted a bookmobile-filled America with a dark European past in which readers had to walk "hundreds of miles . . . to read some book securely chained to a pillar" (2). The text's power to liberate minds figures as the book's power to shake off chains.

Dewey's substitution of a book freed from literal chains for a reader shedding the shackles of superstition prefigures the anthropomorphism of Stewart Brand's 1985 claim that "information wants to be free" (49). Modernity implies mobility. An 1853 article on "the living language of Greece" contrasts classical civilization with "this age of flying books and itinerant libraries" ("Living Language" 1122).[4] In fact, Dewey defines mobility as a historical imperative: "Libraries must be mobilized. Books must travel." Yet that imperative is shadowed by awareness that for books as for people, circulation has its costs. Another turn-of-the-century American librarian adds that "book-gatherers abhor the breaking up of their collections as we do the dissolution of the Union, or as abolitionists did the

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snapping of family ties by slave-traders" (Butler). As slavery's reduction of persons to things is reciprocated by an anthropomorphism that endows books with feelings, the metaphor of snapped ties neatly inverts Dewey's image of the chained book as a Promethean prisoner, which dramatizes the more mundane fact that incunabula weren't made to be rested on knees. Ergonomics make the laptop book the ancestor of what we now call ubiquitous computing.

The genres that shaped Dewey predicate rising on reading. The bildungsroman, the exemplary biography, and the conduct book each develop a different account of how literacy leads at once to emotional self-discovery and economic self-improvement: their institutional corollary is the public library. Note that Dewey credits this not to books in general but to portable books, as if persons' social mobility depended on books' movement through space: up from slavery, off the shelf. As the literate public expands, reading matter shrinks and cheapens, sneaking into the pockets of individual readers before taking more systematically to the road. Yet the heir of the late medieval girdle books hung upside down at the users' waists for one-handed, upward-swung reading, of the India-paper, diamond-type pocket Bibles that shuttled the British Empire, and of the mass-marketed, ubiquitously sold paperback reprints that emerged from the last great depression may be not some new kind of book but just—according to the man who's waiting in line with me, at least—an old-model smartphone.

Any librarian faces pragmatic decisions about what books, and what readers, to admit. Scratch a rule about what to read and you'll find anxiety about who should be reading it. The institutions founded in Britain in the wake of the 1850 act debated what books to exclude (usually fiction) along with what persons to exclude (usually working-class). The former could provide a proxy for the latter: by blacking out the betting pages of the newspaper, periodicals rooms short-circuited their usefulness to gamblers as decisively as any Internet filter (Snape 50). When R. K. Dent took the initiative to black out the betting news in every newspaper that entered his library, he was also blocking out a particular class of reader: "numbers of rough and ill-behaved fellows, who . . . persisted in disturbing the peace of the reading rooms, and interfering with the comfort of quiet readers" (127). As "numbers . . . of fellows" mimic the numerals redacted from newspapers, libraries take it upon themselves to catalog users as well as books.

Corelli feared, and Dickens hoped, that the geographic mobility of books would enable the social mobility of their borrowers. The worry that the wrong books might fall into the wrong hands figures the fear that the wrong readers rub elbows with one another in the library or even just rub fingers on the same pages. If the wrong books mirror the wrong kind of readers, bad readers are often equated in turn with users who only pretend to read: "Was that miserable dipping and skimming of the surface of that printed page to be called reading?" (Collins 161). Or, as Florence Bell observed in 1907 of an English factory town, "about a quarter of the men do not read at all"; although they follow the betting news, "that hardly comes under the head of reading" (207).

Post-1850 British public libraries' quotas on fiction borrowing, too, were kept in countenance by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1817 dismissal of novel readers: "I dare not compliment their pass-time, or rather kill-time, with the name of reading" (1: 48–49). Readers' motives are sifted at the entrance as mercilessly as their bags at the exit. George Gissing's 1897 short story "Spellbound" treats the library less like an ecclesiastical sanctuary than like an opium den: its unemployed protagonist escapes the lodgings where his wife takes in sewing by commuting every morning to the public library, whose "reading-room, with its smell of new print, once more drugged his conscience, and there he sat until nightfall"

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(265). Should the public library's public include the homeless or the officeless?

The attention devoted to that question tracks the health of national economies. As evictions rise during a recession, they fuel awareness that library buildings hold not just books and computers but also radiators and hot water faucets. Julie Hersberger, a library scientist in Indiana who defends library access as a civic right, contests one librarian's declaration that "a library is not a refuge for the homeless. . . . A disruptive minority is effectively preventing the majority of bona fide library patrons from exercising their rights" (200). Hersberger's rejoinder? No library would dream of excluding "toddlers, who can be smelly and loud, are not in the library reading anything and are often asleep," and though patrons and staff members with chemical sensitivities may suffer from the perfume used by readers nearby, "few refer to those wealthy enough to douse themselves in fragrance as a problem patron." The rich have bodies too.

On the one hand, reading rooms put a roof over patrons' heads as well as books in their hands; on the other, books scale library walls to take to the streets. The early modern peddler toting chapbooks gives way to newer transportation technologies. A not-for-profit organization called Street Books bikes books around Portland to serve readers, most of all those who are socially and economically marginalized (Johnson).

The classroom is not just a scene of reading but a scene of scholarship about reading: of reader-response critics who share with book historians the ambition to read over the shoulders of other readers, dead or alive. Because upstaging a text's author by attending to its readers means shifting from the privileged one to the miscellaneous many, the history of reading allied itself in the twentieth century with the populist ambitions of history from below. Methodology doubles ideology when the Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau, trying to convey how few are the traces readers leave to future researchers to recover, hits on the metaphor of poaching: "Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields" (174). If the writer figures as a farmer scratching the stony soil, the reader is a bee flitting from flower to flower, text to text. (Dewey also compares itinerant libraries to a new, and eventually less durable, scheme for transporting beehives by rail.) In this age of eviction, a civic temple may be less useful than a parking space.

Notes

1. Chang, Aeschbach, Duffy, and Czeisler. The crucial variable in this study seemed to be the wavelength and intensity of light, since a screen emits a shorter-wavelength light than a lightbulb does.

2. I borrow the pun *bookhandling* from O'Brien 19.

3. On the history of the bookmobile, see Brown; Ranck.

4. Thanks to Simon Stern for this reference.

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