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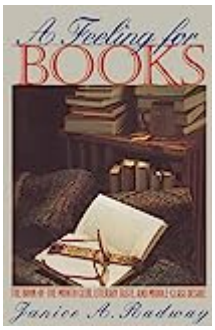

Janice A. Radway. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiii + 424 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2357-6.

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Defining Self-Identity Through Middle-Brow Literature

Janice A. Radway examines the Book-of-the-Month Club's relationship with the middle class and her own love for books in a written blend of history, ethnography, and personal narrative. Radway challenges the way we experience and view reading, and her embedded personal narrative suggests that for a moment we set aside our academic thinking and explore our own feelings for books. Radway begins her exploration of the Book-of-the-Month Club with a confession of her own past love for middle brow literature and her exposure to high brow literary tastes. In graduate school, Radway soon replaced her tastes in literature for those recommended by English Ph.D.'s, but quickly noticed that her new readings failed to create the same feelings of passion inspired in her by reading popular books. She suggests that her experiences as a graduate student, no doubt, led to her specialization in popular culture. Radway's personal accounts inspire memories of my own reading history: of earlier days in the children's section at the public library while my mother in another section of the library looked for romances, of my father's library of classics started for him by his parents when he was a boy, and of similar experiences with English professors determined to teach undergraduates and graduates to read not for pleasure or adventure but to discover the academic values of "real" literature.

Despite Radway's resistance to the literary aristocracy, she finds herself shaped by it and recognizes herself somewhat a literary snob. Her first visits to the Book-of-the-Month Club open her eyes to her own attitude when she finds vast similarities between her academic reading views and those of the Book-of-the-Month Club editors. Her surprise is obvious when she describes her discovery that Bill Zinsser, Executive Editor, previously taught writing at Yale. As she spends more time with the editors, she finds herself less able to separate herself as a literary critic from the Book-of-the-Month Club editors. She also feels connected on a more personal level when during a review meeting, she hears familiar phrases like "I couldn't put it down" and "engrossing," reminding her of her earlier passion for such books. She feels even more surprised, however, when she discovers that the editors not only talk about personal response to books but engage in a complex discourse combining intellect and passion. She realizes then that reading is a "fragile pleasure"

not only because of the time constraints of our busy lives but also because of the constraints placed by those in powerful places shaping our own reading judgements.

Through her observations of the editors, Radway begins a journey of self discovery in which she examines her own feelings for books and her learned reaction to middlebrow readers. She quickly discovers that very little difference lies between her own intellectual tastes and those of the Book-of-the-Month Club editors as she recollects earlier reading experiences that connect and distance her from the Club. She also discovers that the editors are in a time of crisis themselves as *Time* is about to take control of the editors' decision making. In the past, editors selected books based on a combination of pleasure, intellectual taste, and marketability. Marketability stood dangerously at the helm of *Time* and threatened the editors's way of life. Through her struggle for her readerly identity and this time of crisis for the editors, she becomes close to, Book-of-the-Month Club editor, Joe Savago who confides in her that he is very ill. When the editors later fail to contact her regarding Joe's death and funeral, she realizes that no matter how much she connects or desires to connect to the Book-of-the-Month Club editors, she will always be seen as an outsider, a highbrow academic.

Unfortunately, here the personal voice and passion of Jane Radway succumbs to her academic identity. The shift feels odd, making me wonder what happened at that point in her writing. Perhaps she felt personal narrative didn't fit the history. Perhaps the loss was too much. Perhaps it was merely time for her to move on and finish her project. Whatever the reason, I miss her personal connections shared earlier in the book. The next section of the book proves to be a well written third person account of the history of the Middlebrow reader, but the personal narratives are clearly absent. I find that while Radway stops making those personal connections, I can not. In Part One Radway inspires personal reactions from the reader, and I find that, despite Radway's changed tone, I continue to relate her words to my own reading experience. Suddenly I see the family library and my parents' consumption of books is about taste, appearance, intellect and the arrival to the middle class. Part two tells of the fascinating controversy surrounding the founding of mail order books and the impact such books had on the newly-arrived middle class, but I want more from Radway. I want to know what happened after Joe died, what happened to the editors at the Book-of-the-Month Club, and what happened in that personal reading journey.

Radway returns to personal narrative in Part Three where she explores Book-of-the-Month Club readers and uses herself as an example. During a lengthy convalescence as a child, Radway's school librarian ships her several boxes of books to keep her mind busy. The boxes contain what she later recognizes as Book-of-the-Month Club selections. In this final section she explores a few of these. Comparing her childhood readings to her recent rereading of *Marjorie Morningstar* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she provides a careful analysis of the books as a source of identity and of personal pleasure. The narrative is every bit as thought provoking as that in the first section, but what about the crisis at the Book-of-the-Month Club and her previous interactions with the members? In the Afterword, Radway explains the process in which *Time* slowly unfolded the original team of editors. She carefully emphasizes that this should not be seen as a rather ironic ending for the story of a company founded on consumerism, but rather as a story about the reading middle class and their interaction with books in the past and in the future.

This book is for anyone interested in the cultural impact of books on the middle class. It is definitely for everyone who has ever pondered the power of books and their own journey through literature.

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