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Unpacking the “Red Flag” Bookshelf: Negotiating Literary Value on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

On 24 August 2020, the writer Jess McHugh posted on Twitter a list of her “Top 7 Warning Signs in a Man’s Bookshelf”. At the very top of her list of red flags was “A Dogeared copy of *Infinite Jest*.” This was followed by “Too much Hemingway”, “Any amount of Bukowski”, “AYN. RAND”, and Goethe. *Lolita* and Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* also made the cut. McHugh’s tweet quickly went viral across the platform, gaining 3200 replies, 6000 retweets and 17,000 likes over the next four days, as well as news coverage in a variety of venues, including the *Onion AV Club* and *The Times of India*. Drawing on platform analysis and qualitative analysis of Twitter data, this article will examine McHugh’s bookshelf meme and some of the many responses—discussions, appropriations and alternative lists, and counter-lists—that it generated (not least from readers of Goethe). It will ask what this episode reveals about the effect of algorithmically curated digital space on understandings of reading, taste, gender, and canonicity in the early 2020s. To what extent do the specific dynamics, affordances, and posting cultures of a virtual platform space like Twitter affect the way “book talk” unfolds online?


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On 24 August 2020, the American writer Jess McHugh posted on Twitter a list of her “Top 7 Warning Signs in a Man’s Bookshelf.” At the very top of her list of literary red flags was “A Dog-eared copy” of David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*. This was followed by “Too Much Hemingway,” “Any amount of Bukowski,” “AYN. RAND,” and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Men who identified *Lolita* or Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* as their favourite book also made the cut.¹ McHugh’s tweet quickly went viral across the platform (at least by the standards of bookish Twitter), receiving over 3200 direct replies, nearly 6000 retweets (of which 3907 were quote tweets), and 17,000 likes over the next four days, as well as news coverage in a range of venues, including *The Times of India* and *The Onion AV Club*.² Twitter users replied to her tweet with affirmations or additional suggestions,

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¹McHugh uses an app that auto-deletes her tweets after six months, meaning that the original tweet disappeared from Twitter in February 2021. A copy of it can be accessed via the Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine.” See McHugh, “Top 7 Warning Signs.”

²See “These Funny Warning Signs” and Shoemaker.

posted photographs of their own “warning sign”-populated bookshelves, argued with her choices via antagonistic or critical replies and quote tweets, and adapted the format of her tweet to new forms and genres through creative sub-tweeting.³ “A single Tweet about the ‘warning signs’ on a man’s bookshelf effectively ruined Twitter for a whole day,” joked Jared Richards in the Australian pop-culture and news website, *Junkee*.⁴ Introducing an article on McHugh’s tweet in the youth media website *Pedestrian.tv*, Saskia Morrison-Thiagu, meanwhile, asked her readers to imagine themselves glancing at an “abundant bookshelf” in a date’s living room—and then deciding to run for the door after spotting *Lolita*, Ayn Rand, Bukowski, and three Hemingway titles on it.⁵

At the time she composed the tweet, McHugh was writing *Americanon*, her critical history of American bestsellers and their relationships with America’s founding mythologies, which was published the following year.⁶ It was the questions encountered while researching this book, as well as her wider thoughts on the role of bookshelf display in the construction of elite male identity, that inspired her tweet.⁷ Twitter users, however, quickly made connections between McHugh’s tweet and earlier online discourses around bookshelf display and dating culture that had appeared in outlets like *BuzzFeed*, *Flavorwire*, and *Elle*. “2014 called they want their buzzfeed listicle back,” one user replied to McHugh in a tweet that received nearly 1100 likes, and (despite McHugh’s original tweeting intentions) these themes came to dominate the reply thread.⁸ McHugh’s was not the first viral tweet on the topic of “bookshelf warning signs.”⁹ However, the humour, playfulness, and esoteric text selection in McHugh’s “7 Warning Signs in a Man’s Bookshelf” tweet attracted a particularly wide range of responses, making it an especially suggestive case study for examining the stakes and investments involved in Twitter “bookshelf discourse.” This may have been because its list format provided a readily adaptable template for other users, one that enabled the “sharing, replication, and re-purposing” that online meme culture depends on for its transmission.¹⁰ The title selections in McHugh’s tweet also resonated with already existing expressions of the “problematic male bookshelf” theme (such as the contents of Dana Schwartz’s 2019 satire, *The White Man’s Guide to White Male Writers of the Western Canon*).¹¹ Although this was not a deliberate reference on McHugh’s part, the seemingly metatextual quality generated by these resemblances may have especially appealed to Twitter users already familiar with the genre.

A raised red flag has been a warning sign in European culture since at least the eighteenth century. For the two centuries preceding that, a red flag was a battlefield emblem,

³*Oxford Dictionaries* (British and World English) defines a subtweet as “a post that refers to a particular user without directly mentioning them, typically as a form of furtive mockery or criticism.” In this case, most of the subtweets lacked a critical or mocking dimension, instead mimicking the format of McHugh’s tweet for humorous, creative, or absurdist effect.

⁴Richards.

⁵Morrison-Thiagu.

⁶McHugh, *Americanon*.

⁷McHugh, pers. comm., 11 May 2022.

⁸In accordance with the ethical citation practices described by Driscoll and Sedo, 250–1, tweets quoted in this article have been anonymised to protect user privacy (with the exception of those posted by verified or “public-figure” accounts). The full dataset can be requested from the author.

⁹For an account of an earlier tweet thread on the topic, see Estavillo.

¹⁰Weber and Driscoll, para. 6.

¹¹Schwartz’s *Guide* includes (among other authors) Goethe, Hemingway, Nabokov, and Bukowski. The book’s labelled illustration of its supposed ideal reader carries an “impressively worn copy of David Foster Wallace book,” identifiable from its cover art as the 2016 hardback twentieth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*. See Schwartz, xv.



Figure 1. “Top 7 warning signs in a Man’s Bookshelf,” @MchughJess, Twitter, 24 August 2020. Image of Jess McHugh’s 24 August 2020 “7 Warning Signs in a Man’s Bookshelf” tweet.

indicating that an army was prepared to fight.¹² Resonances of both sets of historical meanings arguably survive in online “red flag” discourse. Since McHugh posted her tweet, the “red flag bookshelf” meme has been augmented by subsequent viral tweets on the same topic. These included one posted by the American comedian Michele Wojciechowski (@TheMicheleWojo) on 10 May 2021 that asked, “You’re on a first date with someone and they tell you the name of their favorite book. You immediately leave. What’s the book?” and received nearly 26,000 replies, 27,500 quote tweets (many of which nominated suggested titles), and 37,800 likes.¹³ A further tweet thread, by the American screenwriter Melissa Turkington (@Leftovers_Movie) on 23 July 2021, posted (with her own affirming commentary) photographs of an anonymous female reader’s disparaging marginalia that she had discovered in a second-hand copy of Charles Bukowski’s *Love Is a Dog from Hell* (1977).¹⁴ This tweet thread’s virality led to news coverage and to Turkington and the book’s original annotator, Katherine Esters, collaborating with each other on a reflective article after Esters uploaded a TikTok video confirming her authorship of the marginalia.¹⁵

¹²“red flag, n.”

¹³Wojciechowski (@TheMicheleWojo).

¹⁴Turkington (@Leftovers_Movie).

¹⁵Turkington and Esters.

Contributors to these and similar discussions sometimes used a particular kind of referential humour to link them to the existing “red flag bookshelf” meme, in which an expression of feigned exhaustion or world-weariness both signalled knowledge of the pre-existing meme and absorbed subsequent discussions into it. “Not the bookshelf wars again,” one user posted in reply to a TikTok video response to McHugh’s tweet subsequently posted to Twitter. Obliquely referencing Wojciechowski’s tweet on 11 May 2021, @Eve6 (the official Twitter account of the alternative-rock band Eve 6) wrote, “can we start the infinite jest discourse again i didn’t get to weigh in.”¹⁶ Explicitly linking McHugh’s and Wojciechowski’s tweets through meta-humour, another user quote-tweeted Wojciechowski’s tweet with: “Quote tweeting this with either ‘Lolita’, ‘Infinite Jest’ or ‘Charles Bukowski’. If I get this right, I might just go viral.” These contributions indicate the extent to which Twitter memes rely on what Emma A. Jane calls the “sedimentation of in-jokes”—a “palimpsestic” or hypertextual mode of communication that transmits the meme via a sense of retrospective connection with already existing content on the platform.¹⁷

There is a developing corpus of scholarship examining digital social reading practices on Twitter, as well as digital “vernacular criticism” and representations of “bookishness” online more generally.¹⁸ Bronwen Thomas has applied the concept of “ambient affiliation” to describe how readers seek out, engage with, and promote bookish material on Twitter through hashtags. This kind of metadata-based affiliation enables users to discover “communities based on shared values” and to interact with others drawn to the same sorts of literary content.¹⁹ “Ambient affiliation” is useful for explaining how groups of users agglomerate in online spaces around mutual interests. However, such an approach also needs to acknowledge that Twitter conversations can also simultaneously be sites of exclusion, digital hostility, and divisiveness—recognition *and* misrecognition—even though contributors are ostensibly attracted to them through shared aesthetic investments.²⁰ Any examination of the antagonistic aspects of online book talk needs to account for how platform affordances—such as Twitter’s profile editing and creation, favouriting, retweeting and quote tweeting, and “follow” functions—influence user behaviour and help to generate patterns and practices of affiliation and repulsion among users.²¹ Similarly, it means exploring users’ complex “entanglements” with the algorithms that sort and generate the online content they engage with in real time.²² As Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp observe, although “social media platforms *feel* like ‘spaces’ where, quite simply, we encounter others,” “their existence is shaped by the underlying operation of platform software and its calculative

¹⁶@Eve6.

¹⁷Jane, 53.

¹⁸See, for instance, Driscoll; Sedo; Murray, *Digital Literary Sphere*, 35–6, 40–51, 105–8; Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 117–19; Pianzola, Toccu, and Viviani; Reborna et al.; and Henrickson. For accounts of author-related quoting and memeing practices on Twitter, see Bourrier; and Spierings. On the attractions of “bookish” aesthetics in a digitally mediated age, see Pressman. On digital “vernacular criticism,” see Nakamura, 241.

¹⁹Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 84–5. On “ambient affiliation,” see Zappavigna.

²⁰On online humour and divisiveness, see Phillips, 29–31; Milner, 136–42; Phillips and Milner, 112–16; and Weber and Driscoll, paras. 6–7. For a discussion of “toxicity” and book Twitter, see Thomas, *Literature and Social Media*, 4, 49, and 85.

²¹Bucher and Helmond, 7. On Twitter’s affordances and their histories, see Burgess and Baym.

²²Murray, “Secret Agents,” 972–5. On online experiences of “real time” and “simultaneity,” see Berry, 201–3, and Couldry and Hepp, 106–8.

infrastructure.”²³ Twitter book talk is underwritten by an algorithmic logic that weaves dynamic content together according to a set of patterns and protocols that is to a large extent hidden from end users.

Literary value, like other forms of cultural value, is produced by “a social system of competitive transaction and exchange.”²⁴ What the digital does is to model new forms of competitive behaviour among users, while providing new spaces and platforms where exchange can take place. These processes are arguably augmented by a degree of “algorithm creep,” defined by Justin E. H. Smith as “the tendency to see an ever broader portion of the world, and even to see ourselves, on the model of the algorithms that run our new technologies.”²⁵ This article asks how “algorithmic culture,” with its “enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression” into the calculative logics of the digital realm, might be changing how readers discuss literary value online.²⁶ The first section relates the “bookshelf red flag” meme to an earlier set of online exchanges about reading, dating, and gender. The “problematic” bookshelf emerges from these discussions as a social signalling device, with titles and authors acting as proxies for their readers’ assumed ideological and political orientations. The second section draws on a qualitative analysis of 300 replies to Jess McHugh’s 24 August 2020 “7 warning signs in a man’s bookshelf” tweet, asking how the specific affordances and posting cultures of Twitter affect how readers respond to the idea of the “problematic favourite” book.²⁷

Discussions of reader response in the digital age often continue to emphasise “deep” forms of reading. In her account of “postcritical” or affective reading practices, for instance, Rita Felski describes how “textual details” can “vibrate and resonate with special force when they hook up with our passions and predilections, our affectively soaked histories and memories.”²⁸ However, what Felski calls the “attachments” connecting books and readers do not necessarily have to rely on direct textual engagement.²⁹ Postcritical book talk on Twitter often addresses the web of connotations and affinities associated with a text rather than the text itself. In these conversations, the social stereotypes associated with certain sorts of reader assume an outsized importance. Book talk becomes not simply an expression of individual reading taste, but a way of affiliating with—or distancing oneself from—the “taste profiles” of certain readership groups, or “calling out” the problematically gendered aspects of particular forms of literary taste performance. In this mode, the cultural capital associated with books can accrue from being seen *not* reading a text, or from publicly disavowing one’s former readerly attachments to certain texts for an audience of social-media followers.³⁰ In each case, books are no longer restricted to a specifically demarcated “literary field,” but are part of a much

²³Couldry and Hepp, 134.

²⁴English, 8.

²⁵Smith, *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is*, 43.

²⁶Striphas, “Algorithmic Culture,” 396.

²⁷Although the Twitter API for Academic Research provides access to tweets from the full Twitter archive, in practice querying it via the Postman API platform returns only a small subset of replies to McHugh’s tweet. Accordingly, tweets were retrieved using the advanced search on the Twitter live site using the query: “(to:mchughjess) until:2020-08-25 since:2020-08-24.” After the random sample was selected, tweets were hand-coded manually to enable sentiment analysis. Tweet codes and classifications were determined in an iterative process via close reading.

²⁸Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 178.

²⁹Felski, “Postcritical,” 137.

³⁰See Gitelman, 373–4; Crispin; and Bullen.

wider set of networked assemblages, encompassing gender, personal identity, and political and “neo-tribal” forms of platform-based affiliation.³¹

Unpacking the “Red Flag” Bookshelf

Purportedly authoritative lists of “dating red flags” are an established publishing and advice column phenomenon.³² Before it migrated to Twitter, however, the most visible application of the “red flag” meme format to bookshelves in the context of dating lay in a series of list-format online articles that appeared in the early 2010s. In a June 2012 *Flavorwire* article, Emily Temple sought to identify which “books might send a potential mate running for the hills should they be spotted on your nightstand or peeking out from your back pocket.” Based on anonymous contributions from readers and other *Flavorwire* writers, her article listed J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Ayn Rand, Charles Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson, Hemingway, and “Anything—I don’t care if it’s *Infinite Jest* or *Lolita* or *Moby-Dick*—if it’s on an e-reader. Sorry.” Temple’s correspondents were also forthcoming about why particular books and authors presented “red flags.” Thompson readers were suspected of straightforwardly identifying with the author, one interviewee commenting that “I have never met a dude who was super-into Hunter S. Thompson who didn’t also wish he were Hunter S. Thompson.” A similar collapse of boundaries between book and reader also applied to *Catcher in the Rye*. “In my personal experience, any man over a certain age who still idolizes this book also still acts like a child,” one respondent noted, assuming that adult male readers who valued the novel would do so simply because they identified with its school-aged protagonist.³³ A 2014 *BuzzFeed* article took the idea of identifying books with their male readers as an explicit conceit. Structured as a series of short, quick-fire conversations among six female contributors, the piece made humorous predictions about what various books would be like if they were reimagined as dating prospects. *Infinite Jest* would be “a self-identified feminist who mansplains feminism at you” and tells you “race isn’t real,” while *A Farewell to Arms* would be “So hot you don’t know why he’s single ... until you do.”³⁴

Despite their ostensibly light-hearted content—and, in retrospect, dated and heteronormative understandings of male identity—the discussions of readers in these articles reflect long-standing debates over what constitutes “bad reading” and “good reading” in the context of literary classics. As Merve Emre observes, institutionalised literary education has long had to contend with its lack of influence on “book talk” outside the lecture hall. Notwithstanding what they might have been taught, Emre’s “bad” readers disregard the strictures of criticism, either identifying straightforwardly with congenial-seeming fictional characters or making judgements about books based on non-literary criteria.³⁵ While its contributors do raise the “social,” “ethical,” and “political” issues involved in reading (and approving of) particular authors, *BuzzFeed*’s discussion of the “dating bookshelf” ultimately abandons all aesthetic distance and reduces the

³¹On neo-tribal affiliations and digital identity, see Robards.

³²For representative examples, see Aumiller and Goldfarb; and Burton, Fishman, and McCrory.

³³Temple.

³⁴Fitzgerald et al.

³⁵Emre, 1–2; 254–5.

question of literary value to its most basic level—if a piece of writing were embodied as a dating partner, would the reader have sex with it?³⁶ (“*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: ‘HELLO.’ ‘TAP THAT.’”; “‘Anything by Margaret Atwood’: ‘GET ON IT.’”³⁷) These accounts of the “dating bookshelf” indicate how online literary-critical discourses are changing how literary value, authorial reputation, and the relationships between books and readers are negotiated.

Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio use the term “prolificity” to describe how social media account holders “shape their identity” in digital space by “proffering” speech, opinions, and judgements in exchange for “social validation.”³⁸ User behaviour on platforms, as Moeller and D’Ambrosio describe it, takes place under conditions of second-order observation, performed for the assessment of what they call the “general peer.”³⁹ The transparent and public nature of online discourse means that all users are subject to a form of mutual, networked surveillance.⁴⁰ Everyone, along with each speech act, interaction, and piece of content posted to the stream, is (potentially) visible to everyone else. Social media platforms thereby create what Ryan Ruby calls “a state of all-encompassing auto-surveillance” in which users receive feedback in “real-time” indicating “the success or failure of each of their statements.”⁴¹ On the level of social practice, this encourages particular behavioural norms and forms of self-presentation.⁴² While it might be targeted at specific imagined audiences, online communication conducted from behind a profile is usually carefully “curated” to attract maximum approval (or “exhibition value”) from third-party observers.⁴³ Profile holders, meanwhile, assess the reputations of other users according to two simultaneous streams of information—their own perceptions, augmented by a sense of how others on the platform rate and regard them.⁴⁴ These external validation mechanisms might be discursive (based on observing what others say about particular users or forms of content), or they can take the shape of credibility-signalling forms of quantification (numbers of friends or followers, or the liking, sharing, noting, retweeting, or favouriting metrics for a particular post or tweet).⁴⁵

“Taste performances,” carried out, for instance, through the inclusion of favourite books in a dating profile, obey the same logic of affiliation and are governed by equivalent norms of prolificity. What may seem like a neutral act, such as providing a list of favourite authors, is in the context of a dating website a calculated piece of (partial) self-disclosure.⁴⁶ The account holder aims by doing so both to signal membership within a high-status group (“readers of literary fiction”) and “match” with potential dates who possess similar taste profiles. These taste statements are outward-facing, targeting second-order observers. Their purpose is to create a positive impression during the brief time a potential date might spend visually evaluating a profile on a dating app.⁴⁷

³⁶Cf. Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*, 13–14.

³⁷Fitzgerald et al.

³⁸Moeller and D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile*, 23, 27–8, 31.

³⁹Moeller, 996–1000.

⁴⁰See Jensen, 371.

⁴¹Ruby.

⁴²See Christensen and Jansson, 1479–80.

⁴³Marwick and boyd, 122; boyd, 43.

⁴⁴Moeller and D’Ambrosio, “Sincerity, Authenticity and Prolificity,” 586–7.

⁴⁵Van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal, 35–6; Shullenberger.

⁴⁶Liu, 253.

⁴⁷Illouz, *End of Love*, 110.

They are responses, in other words, to a form of technologically enabled sociability that relies on eliciting snap judgements.⁴⁸ The logic of prolificity can easily extend from virtual space to the physical space of a date's home, where a casual audit of bookshelves might augment the process of "visual evaluation" first performed digitally on an app. Although the social display of household bookshelves is hardly a new phenomenon, what the strategically curated "dating bookshelf" does is to effectively absorb physical books into the competitive and self-commodifying logics of the online dating game.⁴⁹ The dating bookshelf's value therefore lies in its ability "to mobilize emotional connotations"—to signal via the coded "categories" of bookish "objects" on display that its owner affiliates with a socially desirable "category of people" (and not with a "problematic" one).⁵⁰ While clearly intended as humour, the comments made by *BuzzFeed*'s contributors illustrate this process at work. They are, in effect, bulk evaluative feedback on male taste performances from the perspective of their intended audiences, indicating what books did (and did not) have perceived value on the dating market at the time the listicle was written. The piece ends by straightforwardly offering market intelligence to the (single) male reader. The types of dating partner most in demand, it asserts, are men who read diverse authors ("NOT JUST DEAD STRAIGHT WHITE DUDES") but not in a too-obvious or tokenistic way (by, for instance, claiming to like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* simply in order to "shout," unconvincingly, that "I RESPECT WOMEN!").⁵¹

The depiction of readers in both the *Flavorwire* and *BuzzFeed* articles indicates another way in which online book talk reflects the logics of affiliation-based identity and prolificity. Readers in these kinds of discussions are not treated as individuals, but as *types*, and the characteristics of one are assumed to apply to all other members in the category. This, in turn, reflects what Bernard Stiegler describes as the underlying processes by which digital social networks arise. When they join social media, "individuals" are effectively "transformed into data-providers," "re-formed" into "social' networks operating according to new protocols of association."⁵² Online identities are therefore not straightforward surrogates of offline selves, but instead "herd-like substitutes." Although they seem like assertions of individual identity, profiles (or "data doubles") define users according to their observed affinity with types of content or their calculated similarity to (or correlation with) *other* user profiles within the system, not according to their own individuality.⁵³ Simone Murray makes a similar point about the effect that algorithmic suggestions have in pre-empting the reading and rating behaviour of Goodreads users. The "remorselessly self-perpetuating logic" of the site's algorithms, she writes, "create[s] normative models of readerly consumption—'statistical stereotypes' as it were—to which readers are encouraged to conform ever more closely."⁵⁴ Each case resembles the paradoxical process of personalisation via market behaviour that Jean Baudrillard outlines in *The Consumer Society*, in which the seemingly individual can only (ultimately) be defined in terms of a "type":

⁴⁸Cf. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 105–6.

⁴⁹On bookshelves as social display mechanisms, see Striphas, *Late Age of Print*, 26–31, and Nakamura, 240–1.

⁵⁰Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 209.

⁵¹Fitzgerald et al.

⁵²Stiegler, *Age of Disruption*, 7.

⁵³Stiegler, *Age of Disruption*, 8.

⁵⁴Murray, "Secret Agents," 981.

There is, *first*, a structural logic of differentiation, which produces individuals as *personalized*, that is to say, as different from one another, but in terms of general models and a code, to which, in the very act of particularizing themselves, they *conform*.⁵⁵

The tendency to relate individual readers to underlying “types” emerges from this line of reasoning. It is a form of social recognition which acknowledges that individual “media repertoires” in the densely networked environments of platform capitalism are no longer siloed or “unstructured,” but can instead be grouped together with other “profiles” according to patterns of affiliation and similarity.⁵⁶ These affiliations are not only visible to data companies but are also transparent (via public profiles and metrics) to a wider network of peers. Under the conditions of commodified selfhood represented by proficity, to claim (for instance) Hunter S. Thompson as a favourite author is not simply to state a fact about individual reading taste. It is also to assert membership (knowingly or not) within a pre-existing class, “the type of person who reads Hunter S. Thompson,” which is the “model” to which members of the class are assumed to “conform.” The “code” that defines the category corresponds (on one level) to the observable demographics and market behaviour of Thompson readers (which books they purchase along with Thompson on Amazon, for example, or which titles they “shelve” and rate alongside Thompson on sites like Goodreads).⁵⁷ However, it also relates to the larger, ever-accumulating archive of anecdotes, stereotypes, and folk knowledges associated with both author and reader group that circulates online at the level of the “general peer,” many of which are strongly gendered.

In platform-based communication, questions of value are increasingly understood in terms of institutional or personal reputation. The data-capturing powers of platforms mean that, as William Davies puts it, all engagements create “a trace, which remains attached to the digital identity” of each party, becoming “a type of investment (positive or negative) in their reputations.” In such an economy, “to engage in potentially ‘unlikeable’ behaviour” (or to “like” the wrong things) “becomes a reputational risk.”⁵⁸ The social media “like” acts as a tracking device, which can be used by platforms to monetise engagements and generate data about user behaviour.⁵⁹ However, it also has use-values for other forms of digital social practice and “peer-to-peer surveillance,” such as “like policing”—the act of browsing through a user’s “likes” for potentially compromising “like-statements,” which can be publicised elsewhere in the hope of harming their reputation.⁶⁰ The “like” or “favourite” buttons thereby become points at which affect, aesthetic enjoyment, political engagement, and forms of social and “liquid surveillance” coincide.⁶¹ This incentivises account holders to ensure that their platform engagements accord with the expectations of their follower and friendship groups. Knowing that their public “likes,” metrics, and posting histories are open to scrutiny and potential “call-outs,” users may therefore seek to avoid “bad connections” and the appearance of “matching” with “problematic” content.⁶²

⁵⁵Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 109.

⁵⁶Hepp, 153.

⁵⁷Cf. Cheney-Lippold, 169–71.

⁵⁸Davies, 94.

⁵⁹Gerlitz and Helmond, 1353–4.

⁶⁰Cf. Weissman, 32–4.

⁶¹Lyon, 330–2.

⁶²On the processes and dynamics of online “call-out culture,” see Ng, 622–4, Bouvier and Machin; and Norris, 9–10.

One of the operating conditions of online book talk, therefore, is whether readers believe that making a “taste statement” associating themselves with a particular book or author will enhance their “reader profiles.” Not only do readers thereby convey their own impressions of (and moral and aesthetic orientations toward) a book, but they also have to anticipate how the book is regarded by others (under the evaluative gaze of the “general peer”), knowing that negative affect surrounding a particular title or author could transfer to them by association. Literary value in this kind of economy is prone to “reputation shocks.”⁶³ Authors’ entanglements in cultural or political controversies (particularly on social media), posthumous revelations about their private lives, or a sense that they are attracting politically or socially uncongenial readerships can generate anxiety for existing fanbases.⁶⁴ This reflects the fact that, as Emily Rosamond observes, “reputational capital” in a digitally mediated, real-time information environment can no longer be understood to “accumulate stably” over time. Instead, it is “constantly calculated” and can experience sudden negative revaluations.⁶⁵

Revelations of domestic violence by David Foster Wallace made in the context of the #MeToo movement in 2018, for instance, moved journalist Julius Taranto to publicly re-evaluate his youthful Wallace fandom:

[Wallace’s] work reads differently to me now than it did then. I’m a little ashamed of how much I once loved it. It ... seems sort of juvenile and aggressive in a way I didn’t sense before. It feels infected by postmortem evidence of his real-life moral failings, including his pretty shameful treatment of women.⁶⁶

Reflecting similarly on reading Wallace in the aftermath of these revelations, Grace Chipperfield observed that, “being a Wallace fan in 2018 seemed ... at times almost synonymous with being misogynist.”⁶⁷ These responses illustrate the fundamental contingency of literary value in a real-time reputation economy. Negative external associations can affect both authors’ reputations *and* the self-images of their readers, who may feel compelled to publicly reassess (or disavow) their pre-existing aesthetic commitments in light of new information. Many of the “dating bookshelf” listicles of the early 2010s relied for their humour on a playful collapsing of boundaries between author, character, and reader.⁶⁸ As the reflective comments of Chipperfield and Taranto indicate, however, for many more recent readers, the question of boundaries—where (or whether) to draw a line between reader and writer—has gained a new salience in the age of proficity and interveillant reader communities.

Negotiating Literary Value in a Viral Twitter Thread

The replies to Jess McHugh’s 24 August 2020 “7 warning signs in a man’s bookshelf” tweet illustrate many of these processes at work. Of a randomly selected sample of 300 replies to McHugh’s tweet posted in the period 24–25 August 2020, 101 (33.66%) were positive or affirming in tone, 176 (58.66%) were negative, ambivalent, or abusive,

⁶³Davies, 95.

⁶⁴For general accounts, see Bromwich; and Willard, 108–32. For the specific case of J. K. Rowling, see Driessen.

⁶⁵Rosamond, 106.

⁶⁶Taranto. For an account of the allegations, see Garber.

⁶⁷Bucher and Chipperfield, 69.

⁶⁸For an especially striking example of this, see Breslaw.

while a further 23 (7.66%) were neutral or unclassifiable. Of the positively coded replies, 41 endorsed the tweet or expressed support for particular authorial inclusions. The most commonly endorsed “warning sign” author was Ayn Rand (10 tweets), while other replies also supported the presence on the list of Charles Bukowski (2 tweets), Ernest Hemingway (2 tweets), David Foster Wallace (1 tweet), Turgenev (1 tweet), and *Lolita*. Three responders mentioned the difficulty of reading *Lolita* due its distressing content. One reply referred specifically to editions of *Lolita* featuring promotional imagery of actress Sue Lyon (from the 1962 Stanley Kubrick-directed cinematic adaptation of the novel) as part of their cover design and how uncomfortable these made her when she saw them on men’s bookshelves. Six tweets in this category endorsed the premise of the tweet by referencing their own experiences with men, with three describing how particular authors (Hemingway, Nabokov, and Rand) were now tainted for them by negative associations with former partners. These posts illustrate how “paratextual” or social cues—emotional memories, personal associations, or the remembered behaviour of other readers—can help crystallize an individual’s distaste towards certain titles, even in the absence of a particular negative reading experience of their own.⁶⁹ Readers in this category identified strongly with the ethos of McHugh’s tweet in a specifically gendered way, readily identifying points of attachment with their own lived experiences. A representative tweet in this reply category described how a former partner had gifted the poster a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* and was then upset with her negative response to it. Based on the experience of this relationship, she felt that Rand could indeed be regarded as a “warning sign” author. One reply suggested that young women should print out the list, “lamine” it, and pin it to their walls, while another said that she would share it with her daughter. Six tweets displayed an explicit awareness of the pre-existing “red-flag bookshelf” meme culture beyond McHugh’s tweet, with one user facetiously suggesting that she must have “forgotten” to add *Catcher in the Rye*, while another simply asked, “We’re doing this again?” Seventeen tweets stood outside the debate altogether. Several of these offered amused or ironic meta-commentary on the developing reply thread itself, including one user who suggested that she was reading it solely to enjoy the spectacle of “defensive” tweets from men.

A further 49 replies responded in the spirit of the initial tweet by suggesting additional “warning sign” authors and titles. The most commonly suggested titles were J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, with five nominations each. Other titles and authors suggested by more than one user were Robert Greene’s 1998 self-help book, *The 48 Laws of Power* (three nominations), Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (two nominations), and Friedrich Nietzsche (two nominations). Greene’s and Nietzsche’s inclusions may reflect these authors’ evident popularity among male “red-pill,” far-right, and pick-up-artist online subcultures and the corresponding assumption that their presence on men’s bookshelves would reflect their owners’ affiliation with those groups.⁷⁰ Kerouac, Palahniuk, and Salinger were all regular inclusions in pre-existing iterations of the “red flag bookshelf” meme, although none of these replies specifically made the link. A more playful reply suggested that a man’s bookshelf that

⁶⁹Cf. Gray, 32–3.

⁷⁰On the inclusion of these titles in reading lists found on “red pill” or pick-up-artist internet forums and blogs, see Zuckerberg. For Greene’s American prison readerships, see Gilroy.

contained only *Dr Seuss* titles might also qualify as problematic, while another (perhaps surreptitiously describing his own bookcase) asked whether a collection consisting solely of “random books from college” might constitute a “warning sign.” Seven tweets suggested that owning no books, using bookshelves for any purpose other than housing books, or not being able to specify a favourite author when asked should also qualify as potential “red flags.” Eleven tweets in the sample were posted by men comparing their own bookshelves to the “warning signs” list and then simply tallying how many of its seven items they owned or had read.

The bulk of the replies in this sample, however, were either negatively coded or ambivalent about the idea of the “warning signs” list and its contents. Forty replies (all posted by accounts that identified as male on their profiles) expressed some degree of ambivalence about either their own bookshelves or the meme itself. Nine of these rejected the list as an accurate self-reflection and then described their own bookshelves in a more or less neutral fashion. The other 31 replies in this category, however, employed various strategies to distance themselves from negative male reader stereotypes or to implicitly indemnify their literary tastes. Two repliers admitted to owning Rand but attributed it to a libertarian phase they were ashamed of in retrospect, one commenting that “I got better.” Another user claimed to be “guilty” of owning “too much Hemingway,” but said he was “not proud” of it. A fourth replier identified three of the seven “warning signs” in his bookshelf but claimed that they occupied space alongside “a lot of feminist stuff.” A fifth poster attributed two of his Hemingway titles to high school English classes, lamenting his inability to throw away books. A larger group of tweets in this category, however, sought to explore the boundaries of acceptability within the “7 warning signs” list via humour, bargaining, and disavowal. Three replies asked McHugh how much Hemingway qualified as “too much Hemingway,” with one user sardonically offering to weed his collection accordingly. Another asked if Hemingway books stored “in a box” counted, while a further tweet asked if an unread (as opposed to dog-eared) copy of *Infinite Jest* constituted a bookshelf warning sign.

Additional replies in this category affected relief over not being directly implicated by the list, but then proceeded to extend “warning sign” logic to their own shelves. Several users suggested that their ownership of titles by William S. Burroughs, Mark Danielewski, Bret Easton Ellis, H. P. Lovecraft, and Mark Twain might also be “problematic.” Others posted overtly dismissive descriptions of their own bookshelves, with one claiming that his bookshelf consisted solely of PlayStation 2 and DVD cases (along with a few titles by the American comedian Dave Barry). Similar forms of disavowal appeared in the quote tweets to McHugh’s list. One user quote-tweeted McHugh accompanied by an image of himself sprawled on his back, surrounded by books from the list apparently taken from his own collection. The staging of this “shelfie” is arranged in apparent homage to a 1984 photoshoot of the singer Morrissey posing with Oscar Wilde titles taken from his personal library.⁷¹ In this image, the transgressive aura associated with the “warning signs” list implicitly combines with the “problematic” public persona of Morrissey himself, creating a multiply resonant set of provocative bookish affiliations.⁷² Another user quote-tweeted the list with an

⁷¹See “A Young Morrissey.” On “shelfies,” see Pressman, 35, and Thomas, “#bookstagram.”

⁷²Cf. de Sá and Alberto.

image of his (apparently unread) copy of *Infinite Jest* acting as a monitor stand for his computer, suggesting that because he was using it for a non-reading purpose, “I’m good, right?”

The strategies embodied in these tweets resemble the “I know perfectly well, but still ...” formula that Robert Pfaller analyses in his study of disavowal practices. These posts accordingly become attempts to “escape” identification with reader stereotypes.⁷³ By tweeting in this way, readers either strategically disavow their own literary tastes (but in ambivalent ways that enable them to maintain emotional distance), or, via absurdist humour or provocative self-implication, seek to undermine the logic of the meme itself. Utilising the affordances of Twitter—in particular, the fragmentary mode of communication encouraged by the platform’s 280-character limit—these tweets evoke the “irreverent,” incongruous, or “idiosyncratic” textual linkages characteristic of postcritical literary response.⁷⁴ In this mode, openly admitting to owning a bookshelf full of alternative “warning signs,” media cases rather than books, or ostensibly low-status titles (such as Dave Barry, sports annuals, the Dungeons and Dragons’ *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, or Jim Butcher’s *Dresden Files* occult detective novels) becomes a way of denaturing the meme by denying its applicability at the level of the individual user. In passing up the opportunity to claim cultural capital through the display of “desirable” books, these replies implicitly resist the idea of the “credibility bookshelf” as a site of judgement or emotional attachment.

The largest group of tweets in the reply sample (136) expressed partially or wholly negative responses to the original tweet (60 tweets), were openly abusive (14 tweets), or in various ways rejected the premise of the “bookshelf warning sign” itself (62 tweets). The largest number of tweets in the “negative” category argued against the inclusion of one or more of the titles and authors on the list, with no fewer than 17 querying Goethe’s presence. A representative example of these tweets asked, “What’s wrong with Goethe? Wilhelm Meister is wonderful.” Five tweets defended *Lolita*’s literary value. One user judged it “brilliant” despite her having avoided reading it for many years due to its subject matter. Another female poster claimed that the book had a feminist message about the male domination of women and that any man who understood it in that way was “a keeper.” Other tweets defended *Infinite Jest*, Hemingway, Rand, and Bukowski, although most included few details beyond a general claim of personal “love” or literary “greatness.” One reply from a female reader that did defend Bukowski and *Lolita* on the basis of individual reader-response claimed that her readership of these books was part of a process of “healing” and recovery. Another suggested that stigmatising Bukowski readers could be regarded as “classist.”

Any tweet that achieves virality undergoes some degree of “context collapse,” whereby the initial contexts of its composition—and its intended meaning for the particular audience of followers it was initially written for—become invisible to the much wider set of users who are ultimately exposed to it.⁷⁵ Many of the negative responses McHugh’s tweet

⁷³Pfaller, 40; 52.

⁷⁴Stinson and Driscoll, 105.

⁷⁵McHugh had not anticipated her tweet being interpreted in the context of dating culture, originally intending it as a critique of elite male identity-construction through bookshelf display. McHugh, pers. comm, 11 and 26 May 2022. On context collapse, see boyd, 49–51; Marwick and boyd; and Phillips and Milner, 83–5.

received illustrate the effects of context collapse. Users who were unaware of the pre-existing “red flag bookshelf” memes and listicles may have attributed the idea that books could constitute “warning signs” to McHugh herself. This was especially visible in the abusive replies, which typically manifested as personal attacks and neither displayed an awareness of the meme’s wider resonances or histories, nor recognised the likely cumulative stressful effect of large numbers of antagonistic responses on the original poster. Significantly, in terms of gender, 13 of the 14 abusive tweets in the reply sample originated from male-identified accounts. These posts—only a small subset of the vitriol McHugh received in the 24-hour period after her tweet went viral—illustrate the apparent unwillingness of many male users to distinguish a critique of masculine-coded literary taste performances from an attack on their own identities.⁷⁶ In these instances of digital hostility, abusive posters demonstrated an inability “to perceive the subject of address” as “worthy or recognition or dignity” or distinct from their own sense of “self-worth” (or the negative emotions evoked by reading the original tweet).⁷⁷ The large number of users puzzled by Goethe’s presence in the list, meanwhile, were presumably unaware of Goethe’s inclusion in earlier iterations of “problematic male bookshelf” discourse, such as Dana Schwartz’s *White Man’s Guide to White Male Writers of the Western Canon*. The specific pushback against Goethe’s inclusion also, perhaps, illustrates the highly US-centric nature of the “red-flag bookshelf” meme. A German Twitter user would likely have a very different response to Goethe’s presence on the list than an American user familiar with Schwartz’s book and, perhaps, with Goethe’s recent appropriation by certain platform-based micro-celebrities associated with “incel” (involuntary-celibate) American internet subcultures.⁷⁸

Among those replies that resisted the premise of the “bookshelf warning sign,” a number of users did attempt to relate the tweet to larger contextual issues. In some cases, this context consisted of highly gendered, contemporary culture-war talking points, with 8 of the 61 replies under this heading asserting that the list was anti-men, an example of the impact of “gender studies,” equivalent to “book burning,” or that men were being pressured into displaying “woke” books on their shelves to achieve dating success. Four others responded with improvised, gender-based *tu quoque* arguments, such as asking what might constitute warning signs if seen in a woman’s bookshelf.

Outside of the reply sample, the idea of the “warning signs in a woman’s bookshelf” was taken up by a number of posters. Some of the subtweets and quote-tweets on this theme made dismissive or misogynistic references to women’s supposed reading habits by (for instance) posting images of gift-set editions of the complete *Harry Potter*. Other users, however, posted in a spirit of playful and often absurd juxtaposition (Figure 2). A diverse range of female- and male-coded accounts produced parody “warning signs in a woman’s bookshelf” sub-tweeted lists that consciously appropriated and redirected the negative potential of these stereotypes, featuring Anais Nin, Camille Paglia, Louisa May Alcott, Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Sylvia

⁷⁶Jess McHugh, pers. comm., 11 May 2022.

⁷⁷Thompson and Cover, 2.

⁷⁸See Siegel and Bergamini.



Kat Rosenfield  @katr... · 24/08/2020 ...

top warning signs in a woman's bookshelf:

1. dog-eared copy of Mein Kampf
2. Too Much Rachael Ray
3. a homemade anthology of incel manifestos hand-bound in artisanal leather
4. shrunken mummified human head hidden behind Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*
5. MALCOLM. GLADWELL.

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 11

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Figure 2. @katrosenfield, Twitter, 24 August 2020. Image of Kat Rosenfield's 24 August 2020 "top warning signs in a woman's bookshelf" tweet.

Plath, Virginia Woolf, Cheryl Strayed, Elizabeth Gilbert, "a dog-eared copy of *Rebecca*," *The SCUM Manifesto*, and the assertion that "*Wuthering Heights* is my favourite book."

Red-Flag Bookshelves and Social Stereotypes

Many of the stereotypes associated with the male-coded, red-flag bookshelf draw on an existing set of American literary-journalistic discourses centring on the figures of the "bro" and the "lit-bro." For Ann Friedman, the "bro" was "shorthand for the sort of privileged ignorance that thrives in groups dominated by wealthy, white, straight men."⁷⁹ The related figure of the "lit-bro" represented the attitudes and behaviour of a bookish subset of these men enrolled as English majors on elite college campuses, within post-college media and literary circles, and in their relationships with women.⁸⁰ The "Lit-Bro," according to Geoff Baillie, was "*that guy* in your English course: loquacious" and "eager to impress," but chauvinistic towards women and ultimately utilitarian in his approach to literature. "Rather than reading for enjoyment or enlightenment," Baillie suggested, "Lit-Bros treat reading as a means to show off how smart and cultured they are."⁸¹ The "Your MFA" in the Twitter handle of @GuyInYourMFA, the satirical Twitter account cited by Baillie as exemplifying the "lit-bro," ostensibly gestures towards the core audience for this line of critique. However, the popularity of the account (which as of mid-2022 still has over 85,900 followers despite being dormant since 2019), as well as that of its spin-off book, indicates that the lit-bro resonated with a much wider audience than students in graduate-level American creative writing courses.⁸²

⁷⁹Friedman.

⁸⁰Coyle.

⁸¹Baillie.

⁸²See *Ibid.*; and Schwartz.

As the use of repeated phrases like “that guy” indicates, these accounts more or less explicitly acknowledged that the lit-bro was a type—a figure who did not necessarily correspond to any particular male reader of literary fiction but who could (potentially) stand in for all of them. Although many (though by no means all) literary-journalistic accounts of the lit-bro were relatively humorous in tone, the sheer profusion of them in the early to mid-2010s suggests that the figure nevertheless fulfilled an important social role within bookish journalism. In the hands of literary commentators, it became a social stereotype—a “tool” that could be used to “represent” a “shared social reality” in order “to achieve particular objectives within it.”⁸³ The lit-bro embodied a sense of unease and impatience with a group of readers and reading practices coded as excessively “male,” “intellectual,” and white.⁸⁴ In many of these pieces, the critical focus on the lit-bro was specifically gendered. The figure enabled female readers to articulate their negative experiences of and frustrations with a certain repertoire of male behaviour expressed in relation to literature, one that sought to exclude or belittle female perspectives. By elaborating on the lit-bro’s unattractive features, deployers of the type could critique these readers’ continued attachment to an older, white- and male-coded literary aesthetics and canon of authors, as well as the systems of education and economies of literary prestige that enabled their reproduction. Writing about the lit-bro’s specific attachment to the works of David Foster Wallace, Molly Fischer provides a series of snapshots of male Wallace fans captured “in the wild,” relayed second- or third-hand by female witnesses. A friend of Fischer’s dismisses a “bookish,” man-bun-sporting male mutual acquaintance of theirs with the line, “That guy ... I just feel like he’s first in line to see the David Foster Wallace movie.” A bookshop employee “rolls her eyes” and sighs in the process of selling a copy of *Infinite Jest*, confiding that, “Every guy I’ve ever dated has an unread copy on his bookshelf.” Moving from these anecdotes to a broader analysis of “the literary chauvinist,” Fischer writes that he is the “kind of man” who knows how to appear feminist, but who ultimately measures his self-worth in terms of the esteem he can earn from other men, a process in which his female partners can play (at best) only a peripheral role. This recipe for romantic dysfunction may be, she speculates, why “some women ... treat ‘loves DFW’ as synonymous with ‘is one of those motherfuckers.’”⁸⁵

The lit-bro stereotype works by amalgamating negative affect from multiple different sources—anecdotes, lived experience, as well as biographical information about authors. It becomes, in actor-network-theory terms, an “assemblage”—a “bundle of associations” incorporating not only the object itself but the developing “discourse” surrounding it.⁸⁶ Its effectiveness derives from what Sara Ahmed calls the “stickiness” of disgust and other forms of negative affect—their ability to adhere to and negatively code objects they become associated with. “What is sticky,” she writes, “threatens to stick to us.”⁸⁷ In the context of social media, platform design logics (and the cognitive behaviours they encourage in users) may contribute to the “sticky” quality of negative affect. As Justin E. H. Smith observes, the internet imposes a “binary, yes or no, thumbs-up or thumbs-down” moral framing onto information.⁸⁸ Moreover, he suggests, social media

⁸³Haslam et al. 161.

⁸⁴Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 122–3, and Holland, 74–5.

⁸⁵Fischer.

⁸⁶Elder-Vass, 106.

⁸⁷Ahmed, 89–90.

users' familiarity with "engagement metrics" increasingly shapes the way they value discourse itself. In a digitally mediated environment, it therefore becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the analogue idea of "engaging" with a text in a critical way from a newer, digitally informed understanding of engagement derived from social media, "where even to mention someone is to increase their standing, to amplify their voice."⁸⁹ The result is a kind of perceptual flattening process resembling guilt by association that Smith calls "adjacency."

Under the interpretive assumptions of "adjacency," readers and the authors they choose to "engage" with become like data points correlated with each other on a graph.⁹⁰ This encourages what Louise Amoore elsewhere calls "correlative reasoning"—a form of thinking that assumes that correlations are necessarily "significant" and seeks to make further "links, associations, and inferences" based on their existence.⁹¹ In the online environment, reading tastes and content preferences are, Smith writes, "rigorously tracked, recorded, and analysed by machines that cannot tell the difference between" critical or intellectual engagement and simple "liking" or consumption. These "data" are then made visible:

to other human beings in our community, who have by now been trained up to think like machines themselves, that is, to count keywords rather than to read texts, and to map adjacencies rather than to think things through on their own.⁹²

Assumptions of ideological, moral, or political affinities among authors, readers, and reading groups arise naturally from this way of viewing relationships.⁹³ To read a particular book or author therefore becomes (from the vantage point of the "general peer") implicitly to *endorse* or identify with them. It also involves potentially affiliating oneself with the politics and beliefs of particular text- or author-based fandoms. By the same logic of affinity, those who feel uncomfortable with an author's politics, or stereotypical representations of their perceived readers, may distance themselves from certain texts to avoid unwelcome associations. Spending time in algorithmically curated online space (and evaluating other users' profiles and feeds for clues about their political and moral alignments) habituates users to thinking in "adjacent" terms.⁹⁴ The long-term effect of being "extremely online" may therefore be an eventual internalisation of the data producing and harvesting logics of the digital realm—the rise of users who perceive themselves and others simply as "attention-grabbing sets of data points" and who curate their externally visible taste statements (and interpret those of other users) accordingly.⁹⁵

The logic of "adjacency" presents readers of potentially stigmatised texts who want to participate in online book talk with several options. As the sample tweets discussed here indicate, readers chose either to ignore any potential threat to their "reader profiles" posed by negative stereotypes, identified with them, or expressed disavowal, while

⁸⁸Smith, "New Eliminationism."

⁸⁹Smith, "New Eliminationism."

⁹⁰Smith, "Keyword Authoritarianism."

⁹¹Amoore, 47.

⁹²Smith, "Keyword Authoritarianism."

⁹³Miller, 153–4.

⁹⁴Cf. Theriault.

⁹⁵Smith, *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is*, 20.

others engaged in abusive posting behaviour. Twenty-five of the tweets replying to McHugh's list, however, resisted the premise of the "bookshelf warning sign" by identifying—and rejecting outright—something like the concept of "adjacency." These users asked whether bookshelves could (or should) be seen as simple proxies for their owners' politics, personalities, or moral values. Six replies countered the list by suggesting that book ownership should not be stigmatised or that any man who reads should be considered a potential dating partner. Five female-presenting users responded claiming ownership of some (or, in one case, all) of the "warning signs," suggesting that the link between ownership of these books and "toxic masculinity" was not straightforward. Others questioned whether there should be any assumption that reading involved an endorsement of (or submission to) a book's perceived moral or political values. Two replies suggested that simple ownership of Ayn Rand did not make an individual a stereotypical "Ayn Rand reader" because it is possible to enjoy or value a book while also strongly disavowing its politics. Another replier similarly claimed that he owned Rand despite being to the "left of Castro" and that he had been originally introduced to Bukowski by a woman. In each of these cases, Twitter users resisted what they evidently perceived as a coercively affiliative logic implicit in the "bookshelf warning signs" concept and strongly resisted its application to their own reading practices.

Conclusion: Networked Reading Publics

Writing in 2004, before the widespread adoption of social media, Bernard Stiegler observed what he saw as the increasing "formalization of the reader" due to interactions with "the tools of computer-aided navigation." Charting these developments, he predicted the eventual formation of "societies of readers," who would pool and interpret their collective knowledge of the information they read according to new systems of categorisation, inscription, and formalisation. While he observed that such digital "reader-societies" were "only just beginning" to take form, he expected them to be characterised by increasingly "mimetic behaviour" and a pervasive "ratings logic."⁹⁶ Stiegler's "society of readers" is defined very broadly, encompassing collective behaviour among the users of all text-based digital interfaces. However, its logic can be applied more narrowly to the users of online reader- and fan-based communities, including Goodreads, TV Tropes, literary subreddits, BookTok, and "book Twitter." Each of these online "reader-societies" involves the pooling of collective literary knowledge and opinion according to new, network-based systems of categorisation, coding, and affiliation—hash-tagging, keyword and social tagging, rating, classification—imposed by site and platform interfaces.

Contemporary affective reading practices rely, as Rita Felski and Jessica Pressman observe, on "attachments"—the connections readers make between books, their own pre-occupations, and elements within the wider world that influence their literary judgements.⁹⁷ On digital platforms, these attachments are distributed across networks, encompassing book-based memes and in-jokes referencing previous literary discussions and viral tweets, reader stereotypes such as the "lit-bro," and the perceived social and

⁹⁶Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, 71–2.

⁹⁷Felski, "Postcritical," 140; Pressman, 24.

political valences of texts and readerships. Any account of “book talk” in digital social media spaces needs to conceive of their participants as *networked* and *emotionally synchronised* reading publics acting and responding together in real time and conscious of themselves as collectives.⁹⁸ Users’ online responses to books therefore cannot be interpreted in isolation from the platform economies they participate in and the specific affordances of social media. On Twitter, these affordances include the public visibility, replicability, and permanence of tweets—the conditions under which data posted to the site is “exposed and exhibited ... to the relentless light of transparency.”⁹⁹ For many users, this “transparency” entails various degrees of social surveillance. Literary opinions under these conditions may become social and political signalling devices. Taste statements (which could involve a simple “like”) enable users to be seen affiliating with the codes and models valued by their follower groups while distancing themselves from outgroups (or association with undesirable social stereotypes such as the “lit-bro”) through the public disavowal of books and authors associated with them. In the case of the men who responded abusively to the 24 August 2020 “7 warning signs” tweet, the relationship between literary attachment and digital transparency was also a determining factor in their subsequent behaviour. For these readers, a sense of apparent over-identification with the gendered codes of social differentiation via literary taste problematised by the “lit-bro” stereotype led to digital hostility. In this case, the instantaneity and accessibility created by Twitter’s affordances enabled these readers to target women who critiqued this form of bibliographically mediated identity. “Toxic” book talk thus becomes a way of compensating for aesthetic attachments that the discursive assemblages surrounding the “lit-bro” stereotype suggest are increasingly obsolescent or undesirable modes of gendered taste performance.

The bookshelf “red flag” is merely one component within a much wider “red flag” discourse, which circulates periodically both on Twitter and in the wider digital media ecosystem that feeds off, commentates on, and amplifies social media trends. The “red flag” provides a means of articulating particular forms of online affect. It speaks to “the difficulty of imagining other persons” in a digitally mediated environment based on the snap judgements that prolificity encourages, as well as anxieties and assumptions about “adjacency” and the “stickiness” of negative affect.¹⁰⁰ For users who responded to the “7 warning signs in a man’s bookshelf” meme of August 2020, the tweet’s virality gave them a chance to apply “red flag” discourse to book culture. The thousands of replies, subtweets, and quote tweets that this generated grappled variously with questions of canon formation, masculinity, and the extent to which reading choice should be driven by moral and ethical concerns around representation and authorial behaviour. The intensity of these engagements—which extended well beyond questions of dating—reflects what Anton Jäger calls the “specific focus on interpersonal and personal mores” characteristic of the mode of contemporary, highly politicised online discourse he terms “hyper-politics.”¹⁰¹ However, as the polarised responses to the “7 warning signs” tweet indicate, these discussions do not necessarily flow in one direction. “Red

⁹⁸Thomas, “#bookstagram,” 2; Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, 75; Virilio, 23–4.

⁹⁹Han, *Disappearance of Rituals*, 88. See also Bucher and Helmond, 7.

¹⁰⁰Cf. Scarry.

¹⁰¹Jäger.

flag” book talk on Twitter instead involves significant discursive bifurcations along literary, cultural-political, and gendered lines. These are generated at least in part by the impact of “proficiency” and the affinity-based forms of identity it encourages and by the logics of culture-war polarisation. The acute sense of temporal immediacy created by engaging with viral tweets in real-time has an affective dimension, providing users with the opportunity to emotionally identify with the opinions and experiences of others or to register a sense of mis-recognition via antagonistic forms of digital engagement.¹⁰²

Few things are ever finally settled in the repetitive, wave-like information environment of the social media stream.¹⁰³ As the later viral “red flag book” tweets of Turkington and Wojciechowski indicate, platform-based discourse tends to revisit the same topics periodically, with subsequent participants not necessarily aware of earlier iterations. Each incoming viral “wave” of book-based literary discussion reiterates the value associations surrounding particular books and their readers in the minds of users, while encouraging them to contribute to the discourse by adding new associations and “attachments” of their own. These literary “memeifications” do not stay limited to platforms or discussion boards. The New York-based literary magazine *The Drift*, for instance, which solicits essays from “young writers who haven’t yet been absorbed into the media hivemind,” instructs contributors on its “About” page that the editors are “bored by” pitches on “refusing to read David Foster Wallace,” but also by “David Foster Wallace.”¹⁰⁴ The “young writer” modelled here is expected to be familiar with multiple streams of information—traditional literary value systems as well as the meme-based and collective forms of literary valuation that operate outside the traditional literary field on discussion boards, social media platforms, podcasts, and pop-culture websites. Literature students familiar with these discursive assemblages may enter the classroom with similar associations and preconceptions already in place. If literature specialists are to understand the emergent discourses through which literary value is negotiated online (and their increasing offline influence), we need to pay close attention to the posting cultures, affordances, and platform architectures of the sites where online “book talk” takes place, as well as the wider, shifting cultures of reader response in which they are embedded.

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¹⁰²Cf. Thompson and Cover.

¹⁰³Han, *In the Swarm*, 7.

¹⁰⁴*The Drift*.

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