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The New Gatekeepers: How Blogs Subverted Mainstream Book Reviews

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

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By Rebecca E. Johnson, Ph.D.

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Book reviewing has a fraught history in the United States. Reviewers have long been accused of not being analytical enough. It should be no wonder then with the emergence of social media that online book reviewing has become increasingly popular. Online reviewers, especially book bloggers, are no literary gatekeepers in their own right, shaping the tastes of readers across the world. Book blogs in particular pay special attention to titles which have long been derided by institutions such as libraries, academia, publishers, and bookstores. These literary gatekeepers typically ignore romance, fantasy, mystery, science fiction, young adult fiction, comic books, and certain kinds of children's literature, calling it lowbrow. Book bloggers, though, demonstrate that such genre fiction is much more than escapist, mixing enjoyment with the literary. In addition, book blogs create space for women who have been systematically excluded from reviewing. The primary way that they do this is by subverting the male gendered language and structure of reviews.

Introduction

This dissertation grew out of my experience working in public libraries. Starting in 2007, I was a children's associate for Richmond Public Library in Virginia. I performed all of the story times at a couple of branches and often turned to the web when I needed ideas for titles to read. This was when I discovered book blogs. I found several where librarians and bookstore workers posted their story time plans. However, the majority of blogs that I found were by people who did not work with books professionally. These bloggers were just enthusiasts who needed a space where they could talk about books. Book bloggers reviewed anything, from classics to genre fiction written for the smallest niche of readers. In addition, their tone was very different from professional reviews. They lovingly described books which many of my coworkers spoke about with distaste.

I was not surprised by their sudden popularity. Everyone at the time seemed to have a blog, usually a sort of online diary. Blogs covered a variety of topics, from fashion to politics to motherhood. News blogs were also becoming increasingly popular as people realized that citizen journalists were sometimes more effective than mainstream media outlets. Even Businesses were obsessed with creating an online presence. This is evident looking at the number of blogging guides published around this time. *Buzz Marketing with Blogs for Dummies, Naked Conversations: How Blogs Are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers,* and *Strategies and Tools for Corporate Blogging* all offered blogging tips to eager businessmen and women. It made sense that book lovers would also turn to blogging.

Other social media sites quickly followed suit. Amazon and Goodreads also emerged as popular online book reviewing platforms. Amazon first became famous for its reviews circa 2006. Goodreads emerged as a reviewing platform in 2007 but only gained real notoriety in the past few years. However, I was most fascinated with blogs because they seemed to offer an alternative to traditional reviews.   In the first place, they are usually longer than reviews on sites like Amazon and Goodreads so users can learn more about titles.   At the same time, book blogs retain what people love so much about social media--readers can interact with each other in the comments section of reviews. My suspicions appear to be correct. Reviews on Amazon are now viewed as little more than advertisements, despite the initial enthusiasm for the site. Goodreads, on the other hand, remains wildly popular with over 25 million users (Dillworth par. 1). Blogs, though, are the only type of social media to become integral to the book industry's daily operations. Publishers used to spend millions of dollars every year promoting new authors' works. This practice has not disappeared. However, publishers now reserve most of their time and energy for those authors and titles guaranteed to generate the most revenue, leaving bloggers to pick up the slack.

It is difficult to gauge the exact size and shape of the book blogosphere now that Technorati, a blog ranking website, is defunct.   However, book blogs did spawn their own conference which takes place every year at the Book Expo of America.   BEA began in the late 1940s as an event where publishers could meet with prospective customers (Ulin par. 1). However, it eventually turned into a networking opportunity for anyone in the book industry, from librarians to bookstore workers. The inclusion of a conference for bloggers signals a

widespread acceptance by the book industry. This idea can also be confirmed looking at the list

of panels for the most recent Book Expo of America's Bloggers' Conference. The description

for one entitled "Monetization & Business" reads: "Want to turn book love into a business? Let's

talk about opportunities to monetize your online presence – through business planning, affiliate

programs, advertising opportunities, and more" ("BEA" par. 45). Another, "Working with

Publishers," showed bloggers how to network with various houses and authors ("BEA" par. 32).

Finally, the description for the "Growing Your Social Media Presence" panel states, "Social

media is one of your best tools to engage with author, publishers and other bloggers" ("BEA"

par. 16). Book blogging has clearly turned from a hobby that people did in their spare time into

a full-fledged business.

In addition, blog "tours" have become an integral part of promoting books. A tour is

when several bloggers review the same title on different days. Tours often last a couple of

weeks. Participants include links to each other's blogs within their posts, and often give away a

copy of the book as incentive for following along. Such tours used to be reserved for relatively

unknown authors who might otherwise have trouble drumming up interest in their titles.

However, major publishing houses now encourage all authors to participate in tours. For

example, Random House's website offers several tips on how to get started. According to the

publishers, authors can arrange their own tours ("Everything You Need" par. 11). They can also

enlist a company to perform tours for them such as YA Bound Book Tours or Enchanted Book

Promotions (Strandberg pars. 9-24). Even when books receive reviews by mainstream

publications, many authors state that tours are more effective at creating buzz. For example,

Miriam Gershow, author of *The Local News,* writes that she had her book reviewed by the *New York Times.* However, afterward there was an "almost deafening silence" (Gershow par. 4). To counteract this, the author hired bloggers to do a tour of her book. The author believes that the sustained coverage helped to keep her book in the public eye, making it a best-seller (Gershow par. 12).

For my dissertation, I decided to trace the emergence of book blogs as a phenomenon. As blogs grew, I wondered what impact they would have on the book world. I also noticed that many bloggers appeared to be women. While I only had anecdotal evidence to support my assertion, all of the blogs I read were by women. I also attended the Book Bloggers convention in 2013 where it appeared that most participants were female. I began to wonder whether women actually made up a large percentage of book bloggers, and, if so, why. I suspected that it had something to do with a study that I had recently read issued by the organization Vida: Women in the Literary Arts. Started in 2009, the nonprofit examines how many reviews in mainstream publications are written by men versus women. When I began by dissertation, VIDA estimated that approximately three quarters of reviews in places such as magazines and newspapers were written by men. In this light, book blogs appeared to be a reaction to the overwhelmingly male nature of reviewing. Where else would women go to review books except online? Again, though, I realized that I wanted to investigate the issue further, first by explaining how online reviews evolved into literary gatekeepers.

Literature Review

Gatekeeping is an essential function of the book world. Research shows that publishers produce hundreds of thousands of new titles every year (Moran par. 1). There is no way that everyone can read all of them. Readers rely on the expertise of gatekeepers—people with a certain amount of knowledge about books---to guide them toward the best titles. Despite this, gatekeeping is a process that that has largely been ignored by the literary sphere. Sociologist Kurt Lewin, originated the theory in 1951. However, he describes how food is gradually winnowed down as it circulates throughout communities. Mostly, the process is written about in relation to mass communications. David White first applied gatekeeping theory to the field in 1964. His research focuses on the actions of a single news editor, though. Timothy Vos and Pamela Shoemaker have written the most extensively on the topic, breaking journalistic gatekeeping into five levels—the individual, communications routine, organization, social institution, and social system. Their research provided a context for the development of literary gatekeeping. Five channels appeared repeatedly through my research—academia, stores, publishers, libraries, and reviews. I examined how each institution controls the flow of books throughout society, relying heavily on studies in book history.

Research on how reviews filter titles is equally scant; there is no authoritative source about the process. *Book Reviewing* by Sylvia Kamerman and *Writing Book Reviews* by John Drewry were the first books to address the topic. Both books are older—the former was published in the late 1970s and the latter in the 1960s—and neither is particularly scholarly. They largely consist of short articles and interviews with various editors, advising aspiring

reviewers on their best practices. However, they give a good sense of how reviews function, covering all types of books. More recently, Gail Pool published *Faint Praise*. It is the most comprehensive source on reviewing to date. Pool's addresses every stage of the gatekeeping process, from the type of publication to editors to reviewers. Even then, though, she paints a very negative picture of reviews, writing mostly about how they have degraded over time.   Even research on newspapers reveals little about reviewing. One source, *Behind the Times* by Edwin Diamond, provides an in-depth look at the *New York Times*. Hidden within is a brief description of how editors select titles for review. The book does not go into much detail about the *New York Times'* filtering process, though.

In terms of how reviewing developed in the United States, several interviews, journal articles, and books taken together provided an understanding of its history. Literary scholar Scott Ellis was a useful source. He shows that the United States lacked its own literary tradition, so reviews provided a method of creating one. John Hamilton, author of *Casanova was a Booklover*, describes how early newspaper editors helped to standardize the operations of early reviewers. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, reviewers were allowed to say whatever they wanted, however they wanted. More recently, Richard Ohmann has written in some depth about the subject, focusing on the 1960s and 1970s which he considers the height of traditional reviewing. During this period, major review publications were widely regarded as literary gatekeepers. Their assessments played a significant role in the sale of books. Finally, general studies of book history filled in any holes left by the aforementioned sources.   Joan Shelly Rubin's research on the beginning of middlebrow culture in America was useful. In addition,

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Laura Miller writes about how bookstores have evolved over time. While neither of these sources deals directly with reviews, they demonstrate that as the demand for titles increased, so did the need for literary gatekeepers such as reviewers.

However, the history of reviews reveals that they have long been the subject of ire. Sarah Fay's article "Book Reviews: A Tortured History" offers a broad perspective on the topic. She describes how reviews have been criticized over the years, starting with their inception. Her article is notable because she touches on well-known critics such as Virginia Woolf. Her inclusion gives credence to the idea that the quality of reviews has declined. A couple of scholarly sources also point to this fact. Hamilton charts how reviews have turned into little more than advertisements for books. While Fay offers a general history, Hamilton performs a close analysis of a newspapers' language. Alan Sorensen and Scott Rasmussen reiterate this idea in their 2004 study "Is Any Publicity Good Publicity? A Note on the Impact of Book Reviews." The authors analyzed book sales following negative reviews. While they do not directly address the point that book reviews have declined in quality, Sorensen and Rasmussen back up Hamilton's point that their function has changed. Sales increase regardless of a review's content, demonstrating that they no longer exist to critically analyze titles but rather to notify readers of their existence. All of these sources help to explain the emergence of online reviewers, especially book blogs, as a phenomenon. As the web grew in popularity, readers who had long been alienated by mainstream publications decided to take reviewing into their own hands.

Because book-based social media platforms are so new, though, little has been written on online book reviewing. There is a certain amount of research on sites like Shelfari and Library

Thing because they are used by educators, but this dissertation focuses on how amateur reviewers came to be considered gatekeepers. As a result, I identified Amazon, Goodreads, and blogs as the most relevant to my research because they are the widely used by the general public. One book, *One Click: Jeff Bezos and the Rise of Amazon.com* by Richard Brandt, gives a good sense of the site's history, including a chapter focused specifically on book reviews. Most of the writing on Amazon and Goodreads, though, consists of news articles. One writer in particular, a journalist for the *Guardian* named Allison Flood, writes extensively about the book industry. Her articles proved to be the most useful, especially because she focuses on newer aspects of publishing. Scholarly studies on Amazon and Goodreads were almost nowhere to be found, despite repeated sources in library databases. The only source that seems to exist is Lisa Nakamura's "Words with Friends." She places Goodreads into the context of literature on electronic writing. However, Nakamura does not write about the specifics of how users discuss books. This again suggests the need for this dissertation.

Research on book blogs is also scarce. Although there are any number of studies on specific types such as political and news blogs, book blogs have largely escaped the attention of researchers. *The Bookaholics Guide to Book Blogs* by Rebecca Gillieron and Catheryn Kilgarriff offers a broad view of the book blogging landscape, breaking them down by category. While the source is comprehensive, it is dated as it was published in 2007 at the height of the book blogging revolution. Book blogs have evolved significantly since its publication. There are only a couple of scholarly sources on the subject. Ann Steiner's analysis of various types of book blogs, "Personal Readings, Public Texts," is more rigorous than Gillieron and Kilgarriff's. Her

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sample is larger, numbering in the hundreds. Steiner pays more attention to blogs by non-professionals, trying to establish their legitimacy. Finally, Nancy Foasberg's "Online Reading Communities: From Book Clubs to Book Blogs" goes into a little more depth about the topic. She focuses on the social aspect of book blogging, describing how users interact with each other in the form of reading challenges. All of these sources were important for understanding the development of online reviews which clearly emerged to fill a gap left by mainstream publications.

However, none examines how bloggers write about books exactly, stressing the need for further study. The second chapter investigates this topic, examining the ways by which blogs discuss books' cultural value. Many scholars use Pierre Bourdieu as a framework for understanding how cultural value is assigned to various works of art. However, my research has less to do with cultural production and more to do with how bloggers challenge cultural labels. As a result, Russell Lynes' well-known and influential essay "The Tastemakers" was most useful for understanding this topic. Published in the 1950s, he breaks artistic cultural products into three categories--highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. "Highbrow" designates someone with sophisticated cultural tastes, usually of wealthy means (Lynes 312). The term "middlebrow" is often used to describe people who are middle class but still aspire to obtain culture (Driscoll 17). "Lowbrow" is defined as appreciating basic pleasure with no worries of aesthetics (Lynes 318). While Lynes' description is thorough, I consulted other sources to flesh out my understanding of these labels. Russell Nye investigates the lowbrow in-depth in *The Unembarrassed Muse*. In terms of examining the middlebrow, Beth Driscoll did the best job of providing a comprehensive

definition. She writes that the middlebrow has eight distinct characteristics: "middle class, reverential toward high culture and commercial; it is feminized, emotional recreational, mediated and earnest" (Driscoll 17). This discussion of taste is significant given its relevance to book bloggers who largely examine lowbrow works—namely, genre fiction.

Genre fiction, though, is yet another under-examined field among scholars. A search of major databases such as Academic Search Complete using "genre" as a search term does not turn up much. When the subject is written about, most literature is by and for educators who do not know what to make of lowbrow fiction. The history of paperback publishing, however, offers insight into how genre fiction came to be degraded by literary gatekeepers. In the beginning, genre fiction was printed almost solely in paperback form because both were viewed as disposable. As a result, research on dime novels was useful for understanding this topic. Nye, once again, writes extensively about lowbrow fiction, especially genre fiction. Michael Denning, author of *Mechanic Accents*, also provides context. He examines how dime novels reflected the everyday concerns of working-class readers at the time. However, the authors also provide a thorough history of the topic. John Sutherland's *Bestsellers* was also useful. Sutherland focuses on the 1970s, when bestsellers first emerged as a phenomenon. Finally, general studies of book history such as Beth Luey's "The Organization of the Book Publishing Industry" demonstrate the connection between paperback publishing and genre fiction.

Researching the history of each writing category also gave some insight into how genre fiction came to be classified as lowbrow. Because of their cultural status, though, some were better documented than others. There was less on new genres such as science fiction, comic

books, and young adult fiction. Older styles including fantasy, children's literature, romance and mystery received more attention from scholars. However, all of the research confirmed that genre fiction has long been viewed as poorly written. For example, in the beginning, fantasy was initially viewed as children's lore because of its association with fairy tales (Mendlesohn and James 177). The genre gained more acceptance as it transitioned into writing for adults (James and Mendlesohn 73). However, it has been difficult to shake the connotation that fantasy novels are overly simply, only offering escape Romance, mystery, science fiction, and young adult literature have been accused of relying too much on stock characters and tropes, going back to their inception. Children's literature is viewed a little differently. Some books have a certain amount of value. However, genre fiction is often viewed with disdain, thereby perpetuating the idea that it is lowbrow (Tunnell and Jacobs 83). All of this research provided an interesting point of comparison for the actions of bloggers who lovingly describe genre fiction.

Finally, chapter three examines how reviews are gendered. Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Judith Lorber all argued that all activities are gendered or categorized as male or female. VIDA is drawing attention to how this concept applies to reviewing. The organization shows that while many mainstream reviewers are hiring more women, men historically have made up the bulk of reviewers. There is nothing that specifically addresses the larger forces behind this phenomenon, though. Studies of reader reception, however, provide some context for this topic. Most focus on the reading habits of women. Elizabeth Long looks at the habits of women's reading groups in Texas; Rona Kaufman looks at participants in Oprah's book club; Linsey Howie studies book clubs in Australia; Ann Berggren speculates generally about

women's reading habits, using case studies of a few women to extrapolate about their reading habits; finally, David Bleich examines the differences between men and women's reading habits in the college classroom. In one way or another, they all assert that men read for information and analysis while women are seen as reading for escape, thereby reinforcing the gender divide among reviewers.

Studies explained the larger social issues that led to reviews being categorized as male. Yet, no one has examined the smaller ways by which reviews are gendered—namely, the language which they use. Communications scholar Cheris Kramarae's *Men and Women Speaking* provided a theoretical framework for this section. She asserts that men are believed to utilize cold, neutral language. The author also addresses the structure of male speech, stating that it does not invite discussion.   In addition, most reviews fail to address how hooks themselves are gendered, preserving the divide among male and female reviewers. Almost all genres portray women as less developed and they are subjected to an inordinate amount of violence. Research on how books are gendered exists. However, it has not yet been written about extensively and the few sources are spread across studies addressing genre fiction. In addition, some of the sources are dated to a certain degree. Newspapers filled in the gaps left by these sources with recent examples, though.

Methods

Next, I had to select the best data gathering technique for examining blogs. Cultural critics often debate blogs' merit, including their writing and whether their authors utilize any standards for analyzing books. However, neither side of the argument offers much to support their points,

relying largely on anecdotal evidence. A textual analysis of book blogs' reviews appeared to be the best method. It is a data gathering technique that involves "making an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee 1). This process entails looking at "word choices, ordering of ideas, sentence structure" for trends. A textual analysis, then, would allow me to analyze book blogs in depth to see what exactly they reveal about their authors' practices. I decided to look for patterns in how bloggers select and write about books. What kinds of titles do they examine? How do bloggers analyze books? Finally, how are book blogs gendered?

Given the vast number of book blogs, it would be impossible to examine each one. In order to define a manageable but representative number, I determined the most popular book blogs at the time. The top-ranked were appealing because they approach their reviewing more seriously. They also had the widest readership and thus, by inference, appeal. By contrast, many lower-ranked bloggers write at length about their personal lives so that they read more like journals than reviews. I began by looking at Technorati to see which sites it rated as most popular. Launched in 2002, the index rated blogs on popularity. It was the only publicly available site that so rated blogs when I started my research. There was no other way to systematically gauge their rankings. Despite this, Technorati was also extremely comprehensive in its data gathering techniques. Its rankings were based on a variety of criteria, including the number of times blogs were linked to as well as page views. The higher the counts, the better ratings the blogs received. Finally, every year from 2004 to 2011, Technorati, released "The State of the Blogosphere," an all-inclusive report detailing every aspect of blogging, from the

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number of users across the world to their reasons for writing online. This contributed to the sense that site was authoritative.

The next issue to decide was sample size, given the volume of blog posts. Scholar Alan McKee writes that conducting a textual analysis "makes it impossible to deal with such large numbers of stories" (130). As a result, most studies of blogs have small samples. For example, Hoda Elsadda in "Arab Woman Bloggers: The Emergence of Literary Counterpublics" looks at blogs' effects on the publishing industry. The author only sampled three (Elsadda 3). *Say Everything: How Blogging Began, What It's Becoming, and Why It Matters* by Scott Rosenberg is much more ambitious, describing the history of blogging's inception; even then, the author examines only eight blogs. Similarly, Joanne Jacobs analyzes six blogs in her study of the publishing world in *Uses of Blogs*. While all of these sources are informative, their samples were too small for the purposes of my study given that the aim is not simply to provide a snapshot of the blogosphere, like many of the aforementioned authors. Instead, I am examining larger trends in how bloggers write about books.   As a result, twenty blogs that largely feature book reviews would provide a better understanding of their practices.   Many blogs were eliminated because they focused on an aspect of the book industry or authors' lives. If such a blog was selected, I moved to the next most popular until the total of twenty had been achieved.

1. Galley Cat adweek.com/galleycat/category/reviews

2. Book Riot bookriot.com/

3. SF Signal sfsignal.com/

4. Brain Pickings brainpickings.org/

5. Book Smugglers thebooksmugglers.com

6. There's a Book theresabook.com

7. The Book Cellar thebookcellarx.com

8. Should Be Reading shouldbereading.wordpress.com

9 Do You Write Under Your Own Name

  doyouwriteunderyourownname.blogspot.com

10. Existential Ennui existentialennui.com

11. Upcoming4.me upcoming4.me/tag/Review

12. Good Books & Good Wine goodbooksandgoodwine.com

13. Jen Robinson's Book Page jkrbooks.typepad.com

14. Broke and Bookish brokeandbookish.com

15. A Dribble of Ink aidanmoher.com/blog

16. The Rap Sheet therapsheet.blogspot.com

17. Forbidden Planet forbiddenplanet.co.uk/blog/category/comics/reviews

18. Tales from the Reading Room litlove.wordpress.com/

19. Pattinase pattinase.blogspot.com

20. Book Chick City www.bookchickcity.com

Reviews covering the span of a year provided a fair understanding of bloggers'

practices. Blogs all go through changes depending on what is going on in their authors'

lives. As a result, every review may not be comprehensive. A year, though, would account for

the fact that bloggers often publish more or less, or make longer or shorter posts. The year

sampled was July 2012 to August 2013. I focused on this time period because it appeared to be the height of online book reviews and I wanted to understand how they challenged the book reviewing landscape. Since then, book blogs have been absorbed by publishers to a certain degree. One post from every month was selected. Again, I used a convenience sampling method, selecting the second review of every month to study, because there is such variation among blogs. The first post was not chosen because some blogs might run special columns at the beginning of every month. Anything beyond the second post was not selected because some blogs are not as prolific during certain months. Within the selected reviews, any that focused solely on bloggers' lives were discarded. The exception to this sampling strategy was book tours. It would be impossible to sample blogs in such a way that every participant in a tour could be seen. For this portion of my research, I identified reviews in my sample which were part of tours and followed these posts to other blogs, even if they were not in the original sample.

Next, I examined selected blog posts to see how they compare to mainstream reviews. I stayed open to patterns which emerged during my analysis. However, I looked closely at the criteria which book reviewers use to analyze books, using *From Cover to Cover* by Kathleen Horning as the jumping off point for this portion of my analysis. It is the only text that I could find which outlines in-depth the criteria utilized by book reviewers. First, Horning suggests looking at plot (Horning 152). Does the action take place sequentially or in flashbacks (Horning 153)? How does the plot's construction contribute to the book's meaning? Characterization is the next element which Horning suggests that reviewers analyze (Horning 160). Are they revealed through their actions, physical descriptions, or some combination of the two (Horning

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162-163)? In addition, the author advises looking at the setting's construction. He or she might develop it in detail or provide a simple sketch (Horning 167). Horning also states that an author's style or use of language contributes to a book's significance (Horning 168). Finally, the author writes that potential reviewers should look for the theme or "overall idea the author was trying to get across to readers in the first place" (Horning 174).   I looked to see whether bloggers use these standards, and, if so, how

In addition, I investigated how blogs are gendered. I began by looking at whether bloggers identified as male or female in their "About Me" sections. When not so identified, their genders were inferred based on usernames and pronouns used. Women made up a little more than half of bloggers. Eleven of the individual blogs are by women and three by men. It was impossible to tell the gender of one blog's author, Upcoming4.me. The rest in my sample are group blogs. However, they prominently feature female reviewers. Women made up the entire staff of bloggers at the now-defunct Book Chick City. Another group blog, Book Riot, largely features female editors. Only one appears to be mostly written and edited by men—SF Signal. Wanting to know more about how blogs are gendered, I looked for general trends in the ways by which they write about books. However, my research was guided by my initial impressions of blogs formulated while working for Richmond Public Library. During this time, I noticed that many book blogs use effusive language, a stereotypical female trait. I also saw that reviews on book blogs are structured differently; they engage in conversation with each other another, another characteristic associated with women. Finally, book bloggers often address issues ignored by mainstream publications such as the treatment of female characters. As a result, I focused on the

following research questions: Do bloggers use gendered speech? How are their reviews

structured? Finally, do bloggers address how female characters are treated?

I then attempted to tie all of these threads together. Chapter one offers a history of book

reviewing. It begins by establishing a working definition of gatekeeping. Within this

framework, I examine how book reviews filter titles, starting with their inception in the United

States and going through the internet. I demonstrate that from the very beginning, book reviews

were the subject of a lot of criticism. Namely, people accused them off not being critical

enough. As a result, reviews have decreased in number over the years, paving the way for online

review sites. Sites such as Amazon, Goodreads, and book blogs have also been the subject of a

lot of criticism. They have been accused of lacking standards. In addition, online reviewers

have come under fire for making reviewing participatory, thereby opening the gatekeeping

process. However, I end by arguing that they have become gatekeepers in their own right,

actively shaping the thoughts of readers.

Chapter two examines how book blogs have subverted traditional definitions of cultural

value. Most gatekeepers concentrate on the highbrow and the middlebrow. Book bloggers,

though, focus on genre fiction which is considered to be lowbrow. I look at how genre fiction

has always been viewed with disdain, starting with story papers and going through the present. I

then delve into the specific histories of genres, including mystery, science fiction, romance,

mystery, comic books, and young adult fiction. Next, I explore how book bloggers treat genre

fiction. They demonstrate that the different categories of writing possess more depth than is

often believed. Genre fiction offers enjoyment to readers but does not rely solely on stock

characters and standardized plots, as originally believed. I end by arguing that bloggers have helped to elevate genre fiction a certain degree so that they are no longer considered lowbrow. Instead, these writing categories exist somewhere between the middle and the low.

Chapter three examines how book blogs are challenging the gendered nature of reviews. It begins by looking at how reviews have traditionally excluded women. Mainstream publications often adhere to stereotypical male speech patterns-their writing tries to retain an objective distance. Book bloggers, by contrast, actively interject their personal lives into reviews. In addition, mainstream reviews are structured in such a way that privileges their own opinions. Book bloggers are more dialogic, creating room for a variety of readers, especially women. Finally, mainstream reviewers ignore the fact that books are gendered. Book bloggers, though, comment on how female characters are treated, whether positively or negatively.   By doing so, I argue that sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, book blogs highlight the gendered nature of reviews. As a result, they are creating an entirely new discourse for talking about books.

I conclude by speculating about the future of online book reviews. Book blogs have evolved dramatically in the years since I started my dissertation. Their acceptance is so complete that people hardly remember SF Signal, Book Riot, and Brain Picking started off as blogs; now they are viewed as mainstream reviewing platforms themselves.   However, blogging is widely considered to be defunct in the wake of other social media platforms.   It is difficult to gauge the exact shape and side of the blogging landscape now. One thing is clear, though—social media, especially blogs, have irrevocably altered the landscape of book reviewing.

Chapter 1

A Brief History of Literary Gatekeeping: The Fall and Rise of Book Reviewing

Gatekeeping is a term generally used to describe the process by which news organizations filter the stories received by society. However, it can be applied to any concept, including the circulation of books throughout society. A number of organizations, including universities, libraries, bookstores, and publishers help to select which titles are considered to be the most valuable. One in particular, though—reviewing—is especially notable because it has not received much attention from scholars. There are a number of stages to gatekeeping within reviewing. Everything from the type of publication to the readers themselves help to determine how titles flow throughout society. Reviews became popular with the spread of middlebrow culture throughout the country. As the demand for books increased, people needed greater help selecting the best titles to read. However, reviews have long been subject to a lot of criticism. Namely, many have accused them of being lax, letting in too many titles. For this reason, reviewing has declined over the years, paving the way for the creation of online reviewing. Sites such as Amazon, Goodreads, and blogs have become popular methods of analyzing books in recent years. However, they have been the subject of much criticism as well. Online reviews, though, are not that different from those in the mainstream. They have become gatekeepers in their own right, actively shaping how people think about books.

Gatekeeping Theory

Communications scholars assert that a gatekeeper is a person, group of people, or institution that has "control over what content is allowed to emerge from the production processes in print and broadcast media" (Bruns and Jacobs 11). The concept of gatekeeping originated in the 1950s with social psychologist Kurt Lewin. He posited that food moves through various channels, each consisting of several stages or "gates." To illustrate this point, Lewis outlined how food makes its way from gardens to kitchen tables. The process begins with the gardener who decides what to grow. However, some plants are destroyed by bugs while others die from lack of water. After the food is harvested, people have to decide how to best preserve it. Some plants might do well in the refrigerator while others need to be eaten right away. If the plants are eaten, the cook must decide how to prepare them. Food might even carry on in the form of leftovers (Shoemaker and Vos 76). Lewin's model is significant because it demonstrates that food distribution is not a straightforward process. Food goes through various levels before ever being eaten. In addition, the food is gradually winnowed down as it passes through each level. While Lewin's research focused on food, he wanted to understand "how widespread social changes could be achieved in a community" (Shoemaker and Vos 75). For this reason, gatekeeping theory has since been applied to other fields.

For example, one of Lewin's research assistants, David White, was the first person to apply gatekeeping theory to communications (Shoemaker and Vos 77). He realized that the news goes through a filtering process similar to that of food. There is such an abundance of stories that someone has to select which are seen by the public. White focused on the

gatekeeping function of editors. He studied how the head of a small-town newspaper selected

stories to publish. "Mr. Gates" formulated his own criteria for what should be considered

newsworthy. He passed on over a third of stories simply based on whether he thought that they

were true. Others were eliminated because the editor had already run similar stories. Finally,

White found that space was often a contributing factor. Mr. Gates had limited room to print

stories; as a result, he only selected those which would nab the most readers. White concluded

that the gatekeeping process can be "highly subjective" (Shoemaker and Vos 78). However, his

study was important because it shed led light on how stories are circulated through society.

Their value is not inherent, instead depending on a variety of factors.

More recently, communications scholars Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos took a

slightly different approach to studying gatekeeping. They studied how news stories go through a

number of gates, from the micro to the macro. First, Shoemaker and Vos posit that individual

journalists act as filters. The ways by which they select stories is determined by a few factors,

including the view of their role in society. Some consider themselves to be reporters while

others view themselves as contributors. The former is usually neutral while the latter is

opinionated (Shoemaker and Vos 47). Next, gatekeeping takes place on an organizational level.

Shoemaker and Vos state that papers usually have policies regarding which stories receive

coverage (55). Large companies are usually strict as opposed to smaller publications which rely

on the discretion of a few journalists or editors.   Next, news stories pass through the social

institution level. This is largely determined by commercial factors. Stories which are the most

salacious will generate more revenue. As a result, they also receive the most attention

(Shoemaker and Vos 76). Finally, stories must pass through the social system level. Factors such as a society's structure, ideology, and culture determine how stories are selected (Shoemaker and Vos 99-104).

Literary Channels

Gatekeeping extends to other concepts as well. Shoemaker and Vos state that it "has proven to be a portable concept, used not only in communication but in a variety of disciplines" (76). It also applies to reading. Several institutions work together to determine which books are received by society. Robert Darnton was one of the first book historians to recognize this in his essay "What is the History of the Book?" He argues that books move through six channels: authors, publishers, printers, shippers, booksellers, and readers (Darnton 201).   Darnton based this model on the operations of French bookseller from the eighteenth century named Pierre Rigaud (187). However, his template does not translate neatly into modern times. Many of the institutions which he recognized have changed dramatically since the 1700s.   In addition, many new institutions have emerged as literary gatekeepers since Rigaud's time. However, the historian's model is still significant because it demonstrates that books move through a variety of channels before reaching readers. In addition, institutions all work in concert with each other. Changes in one produce ripples throughout the others.

A number of institutions act as literary channels now. For example, academia plays an important role in shaping the canon or "the set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political, and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural weight within a society" (Lauter location 48). Some scholars have more narrow

definitions of value than others, though. This is evidenced by various literary anthologies; some

include just a few authors while others encompass hundreds.   While the number of authors

varies, only a select group is ever entered into anthologies, reaffirming the filtering function of

literary scholars. Libraries also play an important role in assigning value to books. Like

academics, they take great pains to select classics for their collections (Ross 640). Even when

patrons read for enjoyment, librarians try to steer them toward the best as evidenced by the

number readers' advisory guides published by the ALA. Next, publishers act as a literary

channel.   They have typically focused on backlist titles or classics, but increasingly look at

frontlist or popular books in an effort to generate revenue. Finally, bookstores carefully select

which titles to carry on their shelves. Similar to publishers, they have concentrated on frontlist

titles in recent years as large chains like Barnes and Noble demand higher sales (Miller location

866). Even though their criteria for choosing books changes, stores still play an important role as

literary channels, actively determining the books which are received by society.

<center>Reviews as a Literary Channel</center>

Reviews are another channel through which books have to pass. As literary scholar

Richard Ohmann states, "The single most important boost a novel could get was a prominent

review...better a favorable one than an unfavorable one, but better an unfavorable one than none

at all" (202). In other words, they play an active role in determining the titles which are seen by

readers. There are a few gates within the reviewing process. First and foremost, the publication

type plays a role in how books are filtered. Journalist Gail Pool writes, "It's inevitable and

appropriate that reviewers could craft different reviews for different publications" (Pool 90). For

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example, professional journals review very different titles than newspapers. The former is written for niche audiences (Pool 90). As a result, journals have the freedom to look at whatever they want, even if the books are obscure or specialized. The publications can also examine titles more deeply because they have greater space. By contrast, newspapers are smaller and aimed at a "mass audience." As a result, they focus on the "newsworthiness" of books instead of providing in-depth literary criticism (Pool 93).

This is the first step in the filtering process, though; books pass through a few other gates. For example, editors are the next level within reviewing. Most publications only have one but larger publications such as the *New York Times Review of Books* might have a whole team. The primary way that editors contribute to the gatekeeping process is by selecting titles. Many state that they simply only want to choose the "best" to review. However, editors have a variety of techniques for choosing books, whether they realize it or not. First and foremost, editors usually eliminate anything that will only appeal to a small audience. According to Rebecca Sinkler, editor of *The New York Times Review* since 1989, "We don't review certain genres-romance fiction, he-man adventures, manuals, self-help and how-to books, the very academic or the Ph.D. dissertation packaged as a book" (Diamond location 6568). By focusing on mainstream novels, editors have a greater chance of capturing more readers. In addition, editors sometimes consult other review publications when determining which titles to examine (Pool 21). Other times, their selection just comes down to personal preference (Pool 26).

In addition, editors also play an important role in the gatekeeping process when they assign books to reviewers. It is their duty to distribute titles to people who will be able to

analyze them appropriately. There are a couple of things which editors must consider when matching a book with a reviewer, according to Pool. First, the reviewer must have prior knowledge about the topic at hand and the authors' prior works, if there are any. Otherwise, he or she will not have a complete understanding of the book, and is therefore more susceptible to assess it negatively. In addition, the reviewer must not have any biases against the author; this can also lead to a skewed review. To illustrate this point, Pool gives the example of a *New York Times* review of Maureen Dowd. The reviewer, Kathryn Harrison, had previously described the author's memoir as "'creepy people talking about creepy people'" (qtd. in Pool 50). Of course, the reviewer did not give Dowd's new book a favorable review. Unfortunately, Pool writes that these kinds of mismatches happen all too often. She states that "the matchup makes for some dubious bedfellows" (Pool 50).

Reviewers themselves form the next stage within the gatekeeping process. They have less to do with the selection of titles, although this might be the case at smaller publications which do not always have designated editors. However, even after a reviewer has been assigned a novel, his or her assessment can vary widely.   Every review takes a slightly different form, depending on the publication. Most include at least two parts. First, reviews describe a book's contents. According to literary scholar Robert Kirsch, "The reviewer should convey to the readers the news of the book, the who, what, where, when, and how of the book, and the why" (5). Most importantly, though, reviewers analyze the development of literary elements. Kathleen Horning, author of *From Cover to Cover*, advises that they look at plot construction, characterization, setting, writing style, and theme.   The best books pay attention to all of these

elements. However, this process is not as straightforward as it might seem. Reviewers are not required to undergo any kind of special training (Pool 37). Some might have a degree in literature while others are simply book enthusiasts. As a result, everyone is going to interpret a book's success differently. One review might think that an author developed certain characteristics well while another disagrees.

An example of the extreme variation among reviews can be seen in Brad Hooper's *Writing Reviews for Readers Advisory.* He cites two very different reviews of *Gone with the Wind.* One paints the novel as a harrowing tale about a woman just trying to survive. It states, "The drama of the Civil War and Reconstruction is rendered powerfully and movingly as a backdrop to following the adventures of a gutsy woman, Scarlett O'Hara, in trying to remake a life for herself in a world torn asunder." This is in comparison to another review which takes a critical eye to the protagonist. It asserts, "Who could care whether this Scarlett O'Hara person will ever go hungry again? She's petty, her story is petty, and Margaret Mitchell has trivialized the whole Civil War period by focusing on such a nonheroic character as Scarlett." While vastly different Hooper concludes that both reviews are just opinions and therefore "valid" (6). By doing so, he demonstrates the highly subjective nature of book reviewing. Depending on the person, one book might get a stamp of approval while it is rejected by another.

Readers are the final step within the filtering process. However, gatekeeping does not stop once books reach them; readers also play a pivotal if undervalued role in how titles are circulated throughout society. Research shows that word of mouth is one of the primary ways by which people find new titles. Friends are viewed as more trustworthy than the deluge of

reviews printed in newspapers. As librarians Peggy Barner and Linda Wallace state, "chances are you'll remember-and believe-what your friends tell you. There is no more powerful communication technique than the simple act of one person talking to another" (Barber and Wallace par. 3). This is backed up by research from the Pew Research Center. It shows that people rely on recommendations from literary gatekeepers such as librarians and bookstore workers when looking for titles to read. However, by and large, people look to their friends, family, and coworkers—sixty-four percent at the time (Zickuhr et al par. 17).

<center>History of Reviews</center>

Interestingly, reviews were not always seen as a literary channel. In fact, they did not really exist in the United States before the Civil War. When newspapers did print reviews, they were quick blurbs, reading more like advertisements than critical assessment (Rubin 35).   In the late 1800s, though, there was a dramatic increase in the demand for books. This was largely due to the emergence of the middlebrow around this same time. It asserted that anyone could obtain culture, not just the very wealthy. This phenomenon was a clear response to the rise of democracy in the United States. According to scholar Joan Shelley Rubin, "The democratization of property ownership and the rise of republicanism enhanced the prospect that Americans of more modest means could attain the respectability formerly limited to the aristocracy" (2-3). People tried to prove their culture in a variety of ways (Rubin 3). Namely, though, it was believed that true culture could only be obtained by turning inward. As a result, there was a spike in college enrollment during the late nineteenth century (Rubin 19). Obtaining an education was no longer considered to be the purview of the elite. Instead, people started

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viewing it as a necessity for society to function properly. As more people enrolled in universities across the country, there was also a greater demand for books and gatekeepers to filter them.

Reviews emerged as a phenomenon due to another reason. As literacy rates spread, people realized that America lacked its own literary canon.   Until this time, citizen largely read works imported from Europe. However, reviews became a way for citizens to establish their own body of great works. Journals such as *Monthly Magazine* and the *American Review* emerged as a result (Ellis 160). They really took up the mantle of gatekeeping, according to literary scholar Scott Ellis: "These reviewers became gatekeepers of proper literary culture, admonishing poor writing, commending strong efforts, and defining for both their readers and potential writers the aesthetic (and thematic) level to which the best writing must aspire" (162). He cites a review of *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to her Pupils* by Hannah Foster Webster as an example. It is about a young, naïve governess who falls in love. The reviewer criticizes the title for its lack of originality, stating that it employs a template followed by many European authors (Ellis 163). The review was clearly an attempt to distance American authors from their European counterparts.

However, some reviewers took their criticisms a little too far. According to Pool, "Reviewers have mocked books ruthlessly" (60).   To illustrate this point, she cites a particularly mean review of *Leaves of Grass* from the time period. While it is regarded now as a classic, one reviewer wrote: "'…it is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that died of disappointed love'" (qtd. in Pool 68). However, Margaret Fuller, editor of the *New York*

Tribune, disliked this trend in reviewing (Hamilton 132). She argued that books should be presented in a neutral fashion, much like the news. Around this time, Adolph Ochs also started the *New York Times* review section. Similar to Fuller, he wanted to treat examining books like a journalistic pursuit (Hamilton 132). The two editors led the charge to reform reviewing, setting the template which is still followed today--"fair, dispassionate, unoffensive reporting" (Hamilton 132).

Reviews grew in popularity over the next few decade, reaching their peak sometime in the 1960s. Anthony Curtis writes that this decade "was a period rich in star-turn reviewers." The *Washington Post Book World* and *New York Review of Books* started during this time; the *LA Times Book Review* launched a few years later. Curtis states, "Their weekly verdicts mattered more than those of any single reviewer does today" (24). A good example of their importance is a study by Simone Besserman investigating the popularity of *Love Story*, published in 1970 (Ohmann 203). The novel focuses on two college students from very different backgrounds who fall in love. The novel sold millions of copies and was eventually made into a popular movie (Ohmann 202). Besserman interviewed many people about how they heard of the novel.   Many participants in her study stated that they found out about the book from television programs or friends. However, Besserman also investigated where those people heard about the title. Overwhelmingly, people reported finding out about it from the *Times* (Ohmann 203).   By tracing the genealogy of these recommendation, Besserman revealed the incredible reach of book reviews.

The success of book reviews during the sixties cannot be separated from other events at the time such as the baby boom. The United States experienced an economic upswing during the period directly following World War II. Laura Miller writes that "The postwar baby boom had spurred a huge expansion of the nation's educational infrastructure, including the construction of new schools and libraries, and the production of an unprecedented number of college graduates" (*Reluctant Capitalists* location 554). This was in large part due to the G.I. Bill. It provided veterans with many benefits, one of which was college tuition. As education spread throughout the country, so did the need for more books. Publisher rushed to fill this need, releasing a greater variety of titles (Luey 39). Bookstores also expanded operations during this period. Before they had been limited to inner cities which were considered to be cultural centers. As returning soldiers got married, though, many moved to the suburbs in search of affordable housing. Bookstores responded by opening locations in strip malls, giving birth to the chain store (Miller *Reluctant Capitalists* location 554). With the sudden increase in book circulation, people needed more help than ever before with deciding what to read.

<div align="center">Decline of Print Reviews</div>

Despite their popularity, book reviews have dwindled over the last few decades. During the height of book reviewing in the 1970s, the *New York Times Book Review* contained approximately eighty pages. However, many review sections were cut in half during the 1980s. More recently, the *Times* has "vacillated between twenty-four and twenty-eight pages." Some smaller publications have even eliminated their review sections entirely (Palattella par. 7). The decline of reviews initially seems to be linked to the rise of technology, especially the

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web. Newspapers can no longer compete with the speed and ease of using the internet. Many

have reduced their staff numbers as a result; others have shuttered their doors completely. For

example, the *Independent*, one of the U.K.'s top papers, shut down in March of 2016, citing

financial issues. In addition, an increasing number of papers are moving their operations online.

As Bloomberg writes, "Prominent papers like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the

Chicago Tribune are pushing digital subscription plans in the hope that readers will pay to

preserve traditional news gathering" (Smith "Fading" par. 1). Even then, though, readers are

reluctant to pay for such content when it can be found elsewhere for free.

The web cannot be blamed entirely for the decreasing number of reviews, though. Their

declining popularity started long before the internet's invention.   Since their inception, people

have argued that reviews are not critical enough, giving too much attention and praise to poorly

written books. Author H.L. Mencken complained in 1917 about the "'inconceivable

complacency and conformity'" of book reviews. A few years later, literary critic Edmund

Wilson wrote, "'It is astonishing to observe, in America, in spite of our floods of literary

journalism, to what extent the literary atmosphere is a non-conductor of criticism.'"   Author

Elizabeth Hardwick made a similar complaint a few decades later in an article for *Harper's

Bazaar*. She wrote, "'Sweet, bland commendations fall everywhere upon the scene; a universal,

if somewhat lobotomized, accommodation reigns'" (qtd. in Fay par. 2). The decline of reviews

then has been going on for almost a century.

John Hamilton echoes these sentiments in his study of book history, *Casanova was a

Book Lover*. He also believes that reviewers have become increasingly uncritical over the years.

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To illustrate this point, the author conducted an informal study of forty-three *New York Times* reviews to see how they described books. He found that reviewers rarely spoke negatively about titles. An overwhelming thirty-four reviews were favorable; three offered no assessment whatsoever, just describing the book's contents; two were a combination of positive and negative comments. Only four reviews were purely critical of a work. Even then, though, their assessments were couched in positive language. For example, reviews used phrases like "'The novel has its wrinkles'" and "'The book does have its gaps and irritating quirks'" to criticize titles (Hamilton 135). While his sample is small and informal, it points to an interesting truth about book reviewing. Increasingly, reviews rarely skewer titles anymore, instead describing even the most poorly written in gentle terms.

Scholars have posited a couple of reasons why reviews have become increasingly dull over the years. Part of their decline has to do with how reviewers are treated, according to Hamilton.   Very few publications have an in-house staff of reviewers (Hamilton 144). This might be the case at famous publications like the *Times*. However, Hamilton states that many rely on part-time or freelance staffers who are poorly paid. Well-known publications pay at least $250 for a review. Most, though, pay significantly less. For example, the *Rocky Mountain News* only pays $20 per review. As Hamilton writes, "The pay does not inspire a reviewer to dig into a book to find its weaknesses" (Hamilton 145). Another reason that people believe book reviews have become so timid is that they care more about generating buzz than providing criticism. Reviewers are seen as an easy way to promote titles. Pool writes that editors are under constant barrage from publicity directors and sales representatives who want to see their clients reviewed

(22). She explains, "From the reviewers' viewpoint, after all, reviews are criticism but from the

publisher's, they're promotion; almost all review business, from sending out galleys to collecting

clips, is handled by the publicity department, whose aim is to get as many reviews as possible

and use what influence it can to make these reviews favorable" (Pool 104). It would be almost

impossible for editors and reviewers to completely ignore such pressures.

The idea that the function of book reviews has changed is also present in Alan Sorensen

and Scott Rasmussen's study "Is Any Publicity Good Publicity? A Note on the Impact of Book

Reviews." The authors examine whether reviews are persuasive or informative. They

hypothesize that if reviews are persuasive, negative reviews will hinder book sales. By contrast,

if reviews are informative, negative assessments will have no effect. Instead, they will simply

alert readers to the existence of new titles. To investigate this issue, Sorensen and Rasmussen

looked at reviews for 175 books which appeared in the *New York Times* over a two-year period

(Sorensen and Rasmussen 2). The authors began by classifying the reviews as positive and

negative. The researched then tracked sales following the reviews (Sorensen and Rasmussen 5).

Sorensen and Rasmussen found that sales of titles went up regardless of reviews. Positive

reviews resulted in better sales, increasing the demand for titles by 62.9 percent. Negative

reviews, though, still resulted in a 34.4 increase in demand (Sorensen and Rasmussen 9). The

authors conclude that this speaks to the nature of reviews now. They are thought of more as

advertisements than critical assessments of titles (Sorensen and Rasmussen 11).

Amazon

Even though print book reviews are on the decline, they are flourishing on the web. As

mentioned previously, mainstream publications typically ignore genre fiction. Readers who

enjoy these types of fiction used to have no place where they could obtain recommendations

except book clubs. Even then, this was a difficult task for those who lived in remote

destinations. This started to change, however, as the internet became a staple in many homes

(Simon 6). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, people viewed the web as a utopia where

anyone could talk about anything. For example, cultural critic Lawrence Lessig discusses this

concept in relation to politics. He claims that there is no real dialogue in America, stating that it

has become "rude to argue about politics with people you disagree with" (Lessig 42). However,

blogs are not subject to such restrictions (Lessig 42-3). While Lessig ignores an important point-

-social media users often police each other in the form of trolling and generally negative

comments—he hits on an important point. The internet provides a space where people can

connect over a variety of subjects. All of a sudden, book lovers had a place where they could

interact with other. More importantly, readers could review the kinds of books which they had

always wanted to see but were looked down on such as romance, mystery, science fiction, and

fantasy.

One of the first and most popular online reviewing platforms to emerge was

Amazon.com. While it sells a variety of goods, the online retailer quickly gained notoriety for

selling cheap books. Reviews often appeared on individual book pages. When the site first

launched in the late 1990s, they followed the format of traditional publications. The site had a

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board of editors, much like a newspaper. In addition, Amazon incorporated reviews from well-established reviewers such as *Kirkus* and *School Library Journal*. However, the site was still more democratic than traditional publications, even in its early stages. The company encouraged all of its workers to contribute reviews, regardless of their literary training, including warehouse employees (Owen par. 5). In 2007, CEO Jeff Bezos took his vision of making reviewing more participatory a step further; he opened reviewing to customers (Brandt 9). This initially seemed counterintuitive to the site's business model. Employees of the company worried that negative reviews would discourage sales. Instead of hindering sales, though, the site did better than ever. Many praised Amazon for being so transparent in its practices (Brandt 10).

Despite the popularity of such reviews, some people often believe that they are poorly written and lack substance, calling them everything from "'banal, obtuse, and blankly opinionated'" to "'disheartening'" (qtd. in Ciabattari pars. 4-5). To counteract this view, the site instituted several safeguards to ensure the quality of reviews. First and foremost, it has a page outlining the requirements for customer submissions. The site includes qualitative guidelines such as "Be specific" and "Not too short" when analyzing titles ("Customer Review" pars. 4-5). However, Amazon also specifically forbids certain types of reviews. The site reads, "In order to preserve the integrity of Customer Reviews, we do not permit artists, authors, developers, manufacturers, publishers, sellers or vendors to write Customer Reviews for their own products or services…" ("Customer Review" par. 12). In other words, anyone with a vested interest in their outcome of a book's sale cannot write a review. The site also states that paid reviews are strictly off limits. Another measure intended to ensure the quality of reviews is that purchases

through the site are marked as "verified" ("About Amazon" par. 1). This does not prevent others from writing reviews. However, the "verified" denotation supposedly ensures that people actually own the books, giving their reviews a little more legitimacy.

However, there is a lot of speculation about whether these barriers are effective. One of the main concerns about Amazon is that users often receive free books. This is a common practice among publishers who send galley copies to reviewers in advance. That way they can share their thoughts as soon as titles are published, helping to create buzz. However, as Gigaom.com writer Laura Owen point out, there is a major difference between traditional and Amazon reviewers. She writes, "those critics are paid by the publications they write for, and their job is to review these books objectively. For Amazon's unpaid customer reviewers, the only tangible benefit of their 'job'…is any free books and products they receive" (par. 7). In other words, in the absence of real compensation, free books become a kind of currency. Some critics argue that Amazon reviewers will be more inclined to give favorable ratings as a result. They fear that authors might mark them as "unhelpful," jeopardizing their positions on Amazon's list of top-ranked reviewers. The lower Amazon reviewers slip in rankings, the less likely other authors will send them free books in the future. This could have devastating implications for the quality of Amazon reviews, though. Amazon reviewers could become so concerned with obtaining free books that they will give anyone a glowing review, regardless of actual merit.

There is also concern that struggling authors purchase reviews on sites like Amazon. A 2012 *New York Times* article sent shockwaves through the book world when it spotlighted Todd Rutherford, creator of the site gettingbookreviews.com (Streitfeld par. 5). He worked for years

at a marketing company where he spent most of his time begging traditional review publications to look at self-published titles. However, it was difficult because the authors were unknown. Even if reviewers looked at these self-published authors, they would only cover so many, according to Rutherford (Streitfield par. 3). He eventually realized that he would have more success reviewing the books himself (Streitfield par. 4). Rutherford charged $99 for individual reviews and $500 for a series of twenty (Streitfield par. 5). The company boomed in popularity. In the short time that it was in operation, Rutherford's company churned out over 4,500 reviews (Streitfeld par. 14). It grew so large that he had to hire a staff. The site even launched a few literary careers including that of crime author John Locke (Streitfeld 44). However, gettingbookreviews.com came crashing down after complaints from a former customer, author Ashly Lorenzana, aroused suspicion about the site (Streitfeld 54). Rutherford defended his actions, stating that the function of reviews had changed. The author writes, "They were no longer there to evaluate the book or even to describe it but simply to vouch for its credibility" (Streitfeld par. 15). Critics, though, fear that this new model is becoming the norm.

Amazon has attempted to crack down on reviews which violate its submission guidelines. In 2012, the site deleted what is believed to be thousands of promotional reviews. The online retailer offered little explanation except, "We do not allow reviews on behalf of a person or company with a financial interest in the product or a directly competing product" (Kellogg 7). In addition, just this past year, the online retailer sued almost 1,000 people from the site Fiverr.com for offering to write reviews for money (Weise par. 1). It is impossible to gauge just how many posts on Amazon violate its guidelines. However, Daniel Levin, author of

Manipurated, offered some perspective on the matter in a recent *USA Today* article. He stated

that a quarter of all Yelp reviews have been fabricated (Weise par. 8). He did not venture to

guess how many of Amazon's are fake. However, the implication is clear--if it can happen to

Yelp, it can easily happen to Amazon.

Even so, there are concerns about the quality of Amazon book reviews. The biggest

complaint about the site is that it encourages untrained people to review books. According to

critics, Amazon reviewers do not know how to appropriately analyze titles. Even if reviews are

written by professionals, they often do not adhere to any standards, reading more like diary

entries than analyses.   For example, the *Washington Post* ran an article about a librarian named

Harriet Klausner who posted over 31,000 book reviews on Amazon (Kaplan par. 3). She was too

prolific to offer real analysis of titles, giving most at least a four-star rating. Her reviews also

followed a distinct template. Writer Sarah Kaplan states that they "were as cookie-cutter as the

novels she often wrote about: usually a two-paragraph plot summary followed by a few

lavish run-on sentences about how great the book was. 'Fabulous' appears in many of them,

as do 'superb,' 'enjoyable' and 'adrenaline pumping'" (par. 9). Clearly, most people cannot

review as many books as Klausner. However, she embodied everyone's anxiety about Amazon.

As *Huffington Post* writer Nina Badzin states, "If every 'review' is five stars, then what do five

stars even mean anymore?" (par. 7).

While Klausner attracted a lot of attention for her overwhelmingly positive reviews,

sometimes Amazon users go in the other direction, giving one star ratings to classic novels.   One

Buzzfeed article "16 Hilarious Negative Amazon Reviews for Classic Books," reveals just how

arbitrary some of these reviews can be. From Dostoyevsky to Mark Twain, Amazon reviewers

tear apart celebrated authors. Some complain that the books are too difficult to understand. For

example, one gave Shakespeare's *Othello* a two-star review, stating, "If you read slowly and put

your thinking cap on, you will get the gist of what the story is about. Or! You can just purchase

Cliff notes, etc. This story is exciting and full of action...........I Think?" (Crum par. 4).   Other

reviewers simply complained that the books are boring (Crum par. 10). Some say nothing about

the books whatsoever (Crum par. 19). While these reviews might not be the norm, they are the

most highly publicized, spawning humor articles on a variety of prominent sites. As a result,

such negative reviews have become almost synonymous with Amazon.

Despite concerns about the quality of Amazon reviews, recent research shows that some

of this anxiety is unwarranted. A 2012 study conducted by the Harvard Business School

analyzed the top 100 non-fiction reviews from several prominent publications, including the *New

York Times, the Guardian,* and the *Washington Post*. They were compared to Amazon reviews

from the same period. The results revealed that the two were not that different, on average

giving favorable reviews to the same titles (Condliffe pars. 2-3). There were some differences,

though. Gizmodo writers James Condliffe states that Amazon users give better reviews to new

writers. What might be viewed as a negative by some, he interprets positively. The author

asserts that the difference in the types of books reviewed demonstrates the narrow mindedness of

mainstream publications. He writes, "'They are, according to the researchers, a little closed-

minded and 'slower to learn about new and unknown books'" (qtd. in Condliffe par. 4). Online

reviewers, though, are much more open minded.

Amazon has another major advantage over traditional reviews. By opening posts up to any and all users, the site shines a light on books which might not otherwise receive much attention, such as vintage titles. One example is a paperback version of *Endurance* by Alfred Lansing. First published in the 1950s, it is about a band of men who become stranded in the Antarctic. The title was poised to fade into obscurity. Thanks to the exposure that it received on Amazon, though, it became a bestseller (Brandt 10-1). As Bezos once remarked, the book's rise in popularity "'was strictly fed by these customer reviews'" (qtd. in Brandt 11). This kind of revival would not have been possible without the internet, especially Amazon. The site also provides exposure to self-published authors.   Now anyone can bypass publishers and post their works online. However, publicizing these works is much more difficult. Self-published authors do not have the resources which publishers possess to promote their titles. Recent statistics show that they make on average $500 a year, a small sum compared to mainstream authors' earnings (Flood "Stop the Press" par. 1). As a result, self-published authors are turning to Amazon to create buzz. For example, author Rachel Abbot published her own mystery novel, *Only the Innocent*, in 2012 (Barkham par. 8). She received enough reviews on the site to make her novel a bestseller. Again, this type of exposure would not have been possible without Amazon.

<div align="center">Goodreads</div>

The success of Amazon encouraged the creation of other participatory reviewing sites. Goodreads is by far the most successful with over twenty million users. As media scholar Lisa Nakamura writes, it "is an amazing tool, a utopia for readers" (6). Launched in 2007 by web developer Otis Chandler, the site is structured like a typical social media platform (Narula par.

1). Users create profiles and can add others as friends. However, Goodreads is different in that participants can also maintain a virtual bookshelf, marking titles as "Want to read," "Currently reading," or "Read." In addition, users can review titles. Titles have their own pages on which readers may comment. The site even hosts thousands of digital book clubs on a variety of topics. They take the form of comment threads on which others post. Recently, Emma Watson, one of the stars of the *Harry Potter* movies, made headlines when she started a feminist reading group called "Our Shared Shelf." She wrote on the Goodreads page, "As part of my work with UN Women, I have started reading as many books and essays about equality as I can get my hands on…I decided to start a Feminist book club, as I want to share what I'm learning and hear your thoughts too" (qtd. in Lodi par. 3). Watson chose Gloria Steinem's *My Life on the Road* to be the first book (Lodi par 1). The club already has over 100,000 members ("Our Shared Shelf").

Goodreads reviews are often praised as being better than those on Amazon. Users are viewed as more knowledgeable, referred to as "book worms" and "superfans" (Weissmann par. 3). This is due in part to the fact that Goodreads is a neutral platform, run by users. Amanda Close, the head of digital marketing for Random House, once stated, "'Because Goodreads is not a publisher or retailer, people feel that the information is not getting manipulated…People trust them because they are so crowd-sourced and their members are fanatics. You can't buy a five-star review there'" (qtd. in Kaufman "Read" par. 10). This is not necessarily the case. Goodreads authors can still send free copies of books to readers. In fact, the site's executives state that raising awareness simply is not enough when promoting titles. According to Cynthia Shannon, Author Marketing Coordinator, authors should also "delight" prospective readers

(Shannon par. 10). She suggests giving away free copies through the site (Shannon par. 11).

However, it is much more difficult for authors to corrupt their Goodreads reviews. While the site

does not explicitly forbid them from commenting on their own reviews, it is strongly

discouraged, viewed as unprofessional (Gray par. 7).

In addition, Goodreads is praised for its ability to shed light on unknown authors. As

Chandler once stated, "'the publishing industry has a huge discovery problem, because books are

going digital'" (Ha par. 4). Struggling authors especially rely on Goodreads to get the word out

about their books, especially those ignored by more traditional literary gatekeepers. For

example, *Fifty Shades of Grey* author E.L. James attributes much of her success to the site. She

started by publishing the series online as *Twilight* fan fiction. However, the series skyrocketed to

popularity after it garnered the attention of many Goodreads users. They posted reviews on the

site, helping to create buzz (Ngak par. 6). The first book by itself has received over 75,000

reviews ("Fifty Shades of Grey"). It was also nominated for a Goodreads Choice Award in 2011

(Ngak par. 7). While the award is virtual, its benefits were tangible--more saw the book as a

result. The books were eventually published due to the exposure that they received online. Now

the series has sold over 100 million books, according to a recent report (Quinn par. 2). The first

book was even made into a widely popular movie. It is doubtful that an indie author such as

James could have made such a name for herself without the help off a site like Goodreads.

Book clubs on Goodreads also play an important role in promoting undiscovered titles.

A recent New York Times article, "Read Any Good Websites Lately? Book Lovers Talk

Online" addresses this phenomenon. Author Leslie Kaufman spoke with members of several

online groups, including Ms. Hettler who runs then website's Next Best Book Club. She does

not have much traditional cultural authority; Ms. Hettler is in fact an employee at a TJ Maxx

warehouse. Despite this, hers is one of the most popular book clubs on Goodreads with over

10,000 members. Ms. Hettler stated that it is her mission to spotlight books by deserving authors

who are still relatively unknown. She stated, "'I am trying to use my platform to spotlight the

underdog'" (qtd. in Kaufman "Read" par. 12). It is because of book clubs similar to Ms.

Hettler's that unknown authors are now receiving significant attention, according to Kaufman.

For example, she cites the book *Wool* by Hugh Howey, a self-published science fiction author, as

an example. It was ignored by mainstream gatekeepers. Through the attention that it received

on Goodreads, though, the book grabbed the attention of Fox, who bought the rights to make it

into a movie.   Again, this type of exposure would not have been possible for a relatively

unknown author such as Howey without the help of Goodreads.

Some people are not so optimistic about Goodreads' potential, though. Sociologist Lisa

Nakamura takes a close look at the site in "'Words with Friends': Socially Networked Reading

on Goodreads." She writes that media scholars believed that reading would become more

hypertextual with the advent of the web, following links one to another (Nakamura 4). This did

not happen, according to scholars such as Fitzpatrick and Manovich, because it is "frustrating"

and creates "false interactivity" (4). What failed to happen with books, though, is happening on

sites like Goodreads. Nakamura asserts, "Goodreads invites users to navigate not in books but in

its catalog, to create new catalogs, and to enjoy other people's collections." She continues by

commenting that books themselves used to be a commodity. People proudly displayed them in

their homes as a sign of status (Nakamura 4). Now networks surrounding novels are the

commodity (Nakamura 7). On the down side, Nakamura notes that many businesses are trying

to cash in on these networks (Nakamura 6). In addition, the site can terminate accounts at their

discretion (Nakamura 8). Nakamura concludes that these drawbacks are "an indispensable

feature of reading in the digital age" (Nakamura 7). However, she hopes that scholars will

investigate their impact on how the site operates.

Nakamura's prediction about the future of Goodreads seemed to come true when the site

was purchased in 2013 by Amazon. Many feared that users would start to focus on selling titles,

not providing objective reviews. For example, one user wrote on owner Otis Chandler's blog

""There are simply too many ways they can interfere with the neutral Goodreads experience

and/or try to profit from the strictly volunteer efforts of Goodreads users" (Flood "Amazon" par.

6). However, others thought that it might actually improve the quality of Amazon reviews. An

Atlantic article at the time stated, "Today, the publishing industry survives on super fans—

bookworms who read far more than most Americans, and who tell their friends what to read as

well. By picking up Goodreads, Amazon gets to tap into those super fans" (Weissmann par. 3).

However, the merger of the two companies seems to have had little effect on Goodreads'

operations. There is some crossover between the sites. Goodreads users can also sync Amazon

book purchases to their virtual shelves. In addition, all ads on Goodreads now direct users

toward Amazon. Despite initial fears, though, there have been very few changes to the site.

Users continue to express themselves freely, in the form of reviews and book clubs.

Book Blogs

Finally, book blogs have become another popular form of online book reviewing. Sites

such as Amazon and Goodreads are wildly successful but limited in scope. The former places

more emphasis on sales, the latter on community. Book blogs strike a nice medium, though,

allowing users to do both. At first, people were unsure of what to make of them. Initial research

simply tried to catalog the different types of blogs which suddenly appeared. One of the first

studies to do this was Rebecca Gillieron and Catheryn Kilgarriff's 2007 *The Bookaholics Guide*

to Book Blogs. The authors describe the many types of blogs which they encountered working

at independent publishing houses. In the early stages of book blogging, the term "book blog"

actually had a few applications. For example, Gillieron and Kilgarriff write that some blogs are

written by industry professionals such as bookstore workers and publishers. However, they

largely use their sites to describe their daily operations, not review books (Gillieron and

Kilgarriff 115). The authors also state that there is the "literary establishment and its blogs."

These are maintained by well-known authors and reviewers. The blogs are used to comment on

the current state of literary criticism, though (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 116). Other bloggers even

use the web to self-publish their books (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 137).

Gillieron and Kilgarriff also spend a significant about of time describing review blogs.

They are generally written by "fans" or non-professionals who simply need a venue to discuss

books, according to the authors. Gillieron and Kilgarriff state, "there are those that are so

completely obsessed with their subject matter that there is no room left on their websites to

mention their own lives in any shape or form" (75). Some focus on particular authors such as the

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Bronte Blog which examines anything about the famous literary sisters Emily, Charlotte, and Ann. Other blogs examine famous literary characters such as Sherlock Holmes (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 79). The bulk of what Gillieron and Kilgarriff describe, though, are blogs dedicated to genre fiction. According to the authors, "some blogs lend themselves more easily to the format" (83). However, they cover a variety of writing styles. I Heart Harlequin looks at the popular romance type (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 97). Mystery is also among the genres covered by bloggers. Sarah Weinman, author of Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind, reviews all types of mystery (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 98). However, she also writes generally about the field, like when a book is made into a movie (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 100). Finally, the UK Sci Fi Network looks at all kinds of writing within the genre (Gillieron and Kilgarriff 92). Gillieron and Kilgarriff use anecdotal evidence to describe the various types of book blogs which they encountered. However, their findings are still significant because they hint at their subversive potential; blogs can cover anything and everything, not just topics sanctioned by gatekeepers.

As time went on, the term "book blog" became synonymous with reviewing. Literary scholar Ann Steiner goes into much more detail about the exact size and scope of these kinds of blogs in "Personal Readings and Public Texts: Book Blogs and Online Writing about Literature." She acknowledges that they can be categorized in a number of ways. Steiner labels them according to author type, asserting that there are four different kinds (479). The first category is made up of anyone working in the professional book industry: "authors, bookstores, newspapers, magazines, journalists." According to Steiner, the blogs are usually nicer in design and post frequently, because bloggers have access to more resources (Steiner 479). On the other hand,

professional non-profit blogs are written by librarians. They are typically viewed as a way to connect with patrons (480). Steiner writes that blogs by non-professional individuals are the most common (Steiner 480). They display significantly more variety than blogs by professionals. The author writes, "most of them read a great deal, and overall many different kinds of literature are brought up." Finally, non-professional group blogs are the least common. Steiner comments that they are usually better written than individual non-profit blogs because contributors work together to edit each other's posts (480). Steiner's study is somewhat limited in scope; she focuses just on blogs in Sweden. However, her work lines up nicely with Gillieron and Kilgarriff's study, commenting on similar themes. Namely, she reiterates the idea that book blogs can be used by anyone and everyone, and as such they give voice to ordinary readers.

As book blogs grew in number, though, criticism about their quality intensified. Similar to Amazon reviewers, gatekeepers were suspicious of how knowledgably bloggers could examine titles, especially those without formal literary training. Barbara Hoffert, a frequent contributor to *School Library Journal*, is a good example of their reluctant acceptance. In her 2010 article "Every Reader a Reviewer," she talks to several librarians about their thoughts on book blogs. She notes that online reviewing is more democratic, allowing a greater diversity of opinions. Hoffert also quotes one librarian as stating that book blogs have "intimacy" and "personality" than traditional reviews (25). However, she spends more time unpacking librarians' skepticism, stating, "Anyone can blog…but, famously, not every blog is bearable reading, not every consumer review insightful" (Hoffert 23).   She gives the example of reviews for Steig Larson's *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* to illustrate this point. *New York Times* reviewer

Michiko Kakutani gave it a lukewarm appraisal, stating that it was "'interesting enough to compensate for the plot mechanics.'" Meanwhile, it received a range of reviews online. Some loved the book while one wrote, "'poorly written, poorly constructed, and, I hate to say, poorly imagined'" (qtd. in Hoffert 22). Hoffert does not comment on the example much. However, by juxtaposing the two types of review, she makes a statement--book bloggers must lack standards to differ so vastly. It is clear that Hoffert sides with one librarian who stated, "I trust Michiko Kakutani a lot more" (23).

Sir Peter Stothard, a judge for the Man Booker Prize and editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, reiterates the idea that ordinary book bloggers cannot possibly be critical enough (Clark par. 1). They lack the training to appropriately analyze titles. In an interview with the *Independent*, Stothard once stated, "to be a critic is to be importantly different than those sharing their own taste...Not everyone's opinion is worth the same" (qtd. in Clark par. 3). In other words, bloggers lack the ability to critically analyze titles. To illustrate this point, Stothard described his work as a Man Booker Prize judge. He had to read 145 books in the span of just seven months. This is compared to the average reader, who might read twenty novels a year (Clark par. 6). Being able to read so many books in such a short amount of time requires a certain amount of skill, according to Stothard. While he does not directly reference blogs, the implication is clear. Bloggers do not have what it takes to read so many books and still provide critical analysis. Stothard concludes that book blogs could have a negative impact on the book industry as a whole. Poorly written titles will start to outshine classics as a result of their

unwarranted praise for certain titles. According to the author, "Eventually that will be to the detriment of literature" (qtd. in Clark par. 4).

Book bloggers quickly gained acceptance, though, as people realized that they have many advantages over mainstream reviewers. For example, journalist John Self praised them as a boon to the literary sphere in a 2012 *Guardian* article, just five years after Hoffert voiced her concerns. Namely, he states that bloggers can cover a greater variety of titles. Books published by independent presses do not always receive a lot of attention from major publications. They usually focus on titles which will be accessible to the general public. However, book bloggers can cover whatever they want (Self par. 6). Self goes on to state that they have much more space to review titles. Traditional reviews limit themselves to a certain word count in order to maximize revenue. They will only make a certain amount of money per review. It makes no sense then to spend an inordinate amount of time on one title, unless it is a guaranteed best-seller. Book bloggers, though, "can explore a book at a length that all but the most prominent literary critics would envy" (Self par. 7).

Steiner also speaks to the widespread acceptance of book bloggers when she describes their impact on the book world. Despite their lack of experience, she states that non-professionals have "developed new strategies and structures." She admits that some of them might be "idealist." (Steiner 481. Blogs by individual bloggers are more "intimate" in tone, often writing about their personal lives (Steiner 487-8). In addition, they interact more with readers (Steiner 489). However, Steiner asserts that bloggers are not as naive as many people believe. To illustrate this point, she gives the example of Bokhora, a group of five women in

their thirties who operate a blog. Members claim to be amateurs. However, Steiner writes that

they project themselves as very professional. The website is polished and features pictures of the

bloggers attending book fairs (Steiner 486). In addition, most members state that they hope to

get jobs in the book industry one day, implying that they must adhere to standards of some sort

(Steiner 489). As a result, Steiner concludes that while bloggers make up a small part of the

book world, they are still significant to its daily operations (491).

Now that book bloggers have become widely accepted, there are even guides. For

example, *The Essential Book Blog: The Complete Bibliophile's Toolkit for Building, Growing,*

and Monetizing, Your On-Line Book Lover's Community by Dr. Ken How offers tips to

beginning bloggers.   The author argues that bloggers are actually providing a service by helping

readers to winnow down the number of books which they want to read. In addition, these online

reviewers are helping to highlight books which might receive a lot of attention (How location

345). This need is especially great as publishers "commitment to most authors is diminished by

the ever increasing need to publish the next blockbuster book" (How locations 333-345). In

other words, they care more about generating revenue then spotlighting great titles. How

continues by describing how novice bloggers can do this. He writes that genre fiction is just as

worthy of review as literary fiction, a fact ignored by most mainstream reviews. However, in

most ways, the book bloggers' guide is not that different than other how-to manuals on

reviewing. For example, How suggests looking at several elements which bloggers should look

for when examining titles. His list includes character, theme, plot, style, and setting, the same

elements covered by librarian Kathleen Horning's review guide *From Cover to Cover* (How

locations 518-575).

As a result, scholars are now taking a closer look at how book blogs operate. Namely,

they note that the sites have an interactive aspect much like other social media platforms.

Librarian Nancy Foasberg explores this topic in "Online Reading Communities: From Book

Clubs to Book Blogs." She writes that bloggers interact with each in a couple of major ways.

Sometimes they participate in reading challenges or "proposals for a certain number of books to

be read on a particular theme in a given amount of time." Bloggers are often limited by genre

and take place for a short amount of time, usually a couple of weeks. Read-a-thons are similar,

but contributors care more about reading the most titles possible (Foasberg 32). Participants in

both review the books and post links to them on a central site. Even so, Sedo writes that the

kinds of communities which they form are different than those on other social media sites (36).

Namely, bloggers are more diffuse. They can interact with each other but it is not a requirement

(Foasberg 35).

Foasberg also looks at how contestants in reading challenges and read-a-thons interact

with each other in more depth. She cites the Read and Resist Tucson challenge as one that

encouraged dialogue among participants. It started in response to a 2011 Arizona law banning

school books considered to be seditious (Foasberg 45). The proposed legislation unfairly

targeted Latino authors. A blogger by the name of Feminist Texican invited others to read the

banned titles. There were not many participants in the challenge. However, Foasberg argues

that it was still important, starting a discussion about the racist nature of the law. As one

participant wrote, "'While this won't introduce books directly to Tucson youth, it may shed some light on how ridiculous it is to remove these books from the classroom'" (qtd. in Foasberg 46). This would not have been possible in a traditional review. Foasberg concludes that this perfectly exemplifies the communal nature of book blogging. Participants in challenges and read-a-thons can discuss serious issues with each other, even if they only post when it is most convenient for them.

Conclusion

Online reviewers started as a method of resisting mainstream literary gatekeepers whose standards they viewed as too narrow. Now, though, they have become gatekeepers in their own right. Shoemaker and Vos state that gatekeepers within the field of mass communications actively shape how people view the world. The authors write that the "information that gets through all gates can become part of people's social reality, whereas information that stops at a gate generally does not" (Shoemaker and Vos 3). Similarly, online reviewers influence the actions of readers across the world. This is clear when Steiner refers to them as "pro-ams." She writes that book bloggers are "knowledgeable, educated, committed, and have large networks" (Steiner 485). DeNel Rehberg Sedo calls online reviewers by a slightly different name— "nouveau literati." However, the sentiment is the same. Like pro-ams, the nouveau literati consists of amateurs but can still be classified as tastemakers (Sedo 1156). Online reviewers exhibit some of the same qualities as mainstream reviewers, making them more than "hacks."

As online reviewers become more widely-accepted, they challenge how society defines literary gatekeeping, making the process more participatory. Before, it was limited to a handful

of institutions. Now, though, anyone can get involved as long as he or she has an internet connection and loves reading. For this reason, online reviewers have been the subject of much criticism. Many see the influx of people into the field as a degradation of the craft; critics believe that they lack standards and are just plain poorly written. However, these criticisms are not so different from those levied at many mainstream reviews. They have long been accused of not being critical enough. Literary critic Joseph Epstein once stated that "'it has never been quite clear what the purposes of a book review are'" (qtd. in Pool 8-9). In addition, as Pool demonstrates, special credentials are not necessarily required to review books for print publications.   It should be no surprise then that online reviewers have become so widely-accepted. They are just part of a democratization process that has been going on for decades.

Chapter 2

Loving the Lowbrow: Book Blogs, Genre Fiction, and Redefining Cultural Value

The previous chapter demonstrated that web users are subverting the literary gatekeeping process by making it more participatory. Inevitably, this has affected how society defines cultural value. Typically, institutions such as universities, libraries, bookstores, publishers, and reviews focus on highbrow books. They are considered to be the best of the best, demonstrating an aesthetic and intellectual superiority. Increasingly over the years, literary gatekeepers have moved toward the middlebrow, which has less cultural value. The middlebrow celebrates culture and enjoyment at the same time. However, it is still assigned a certain amount of prestige by society. Largely, though, literary gatekeepers have ignored the lowbrow. It is thought to be completely devoid of cultural value, focusing purely on the enjoyment of readers. Part of this means that authors often rely on certain tropes. This way they can quickly produce titles, thereby generating more revenue, another characteristic of the lowbrow. Genre fiction has long been considered lowbrow for these reasons. It is typically viewed as a money-maker, only offering escape. As a result, categories such as romance, science fiction, mystery, and fantasy have been ignored by literary gatekeepers. However, online reviewers, especially book bloggers, are demonstrating that this is not always the case. Genre fiction is still enjoyable to read. However, it can also be complex; genre authors no longer rely solely on stock characters and plots. By

doing so, book bloggers demonstrate that categories such as highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow are limited. A new definition of cultural value is required.

Highbrow/Middlebrow/Lowbrow

Gatekeepers have typically focused on the highbrow or the best of the best. According to cultural critic Russell Lynes, the highbrow demonstrates an aesthetic and intellectual superiority. In addition, highbrow readers take great pains to obtain culture. Lynes states that such a tastemaker has "worked hard, read widely, travel far, and listened attentively in order to satisfy his curiosity and establish his squatters' rights in this little corner of intellectuals." Not only that, this type of culture pervades every aspect of people's lives (Lynes 312). The highbrow has to be surrounded with the best artwork and eat the best food (316). Part of this also means that people often work in academia in order to be around culture constantly (Lynes 312). A final characteristic of the highbrow is that he or she looks down on other forms of culture with disdain. Because it takes so much effort to obtain, the highbrow has to fiercely defend the superiority of their work (Lynes 314).

That being said, gatekeepers have moved toward the middlebrow increasingly in recent years. The middlebrow is harder to define, occupying the nebulous area between the high and lowbrow. Lynes divides it into two classes: the upper and lower. The upper echelon is more closely aligned with highbrow tastes.   Someone in this category "takes his culture seriously," according to the author (Lynes 321). The upper middlebrow supports the arts in a variety of ways such as by going to museums and to see foreign films.   However, the term "middlebrow" is usually associated with the latter category. The lower middlebrow's association with culture is

more fleeting because he or she has ulterior motives. According to the author, this group views culture as a means to an end, using book clubs and adult education classes to advance in society (Lynes 332). For this reason, though, the middlebrow is looked on with a certain amount of disgust. People in this category are often accused by critics of being impostors, not really concerned with culture. At the same time, the middlebrow celebrates reading for enjoyment. Literary scholar Beth Driscoll attempts to support this assertion by describing where it takes place. She writes that middlebrow reading occurs in relaxing locations such as the bed and bath (Driscoll location 798). Finally, the middlebrow incites emotion in readers. According to Driscoll, it is often used as a springboard for self-reflection (Driscoll location 697). This is keeping with the middlebrow's focus on self-improvement.

One of the most famous examinations of middlebrow culture is Janice Radway's study of the book of the month club, *A Feeling for Books*. Founded in 1926, members automatically received a title every month in the mail. Founder Harry Scherman largely looked at titles which demonstrated aesthetic superiority. To ensure their quality, he set up a committee of five readers which carefully selected titles (Radway *Feeling for Books* 176). Many came from literary backgrounds, like Henry Canby, a former magazine editor. However, books also had to move readers in some way, according to Radway (*Feeling for Books* 45-72). For example, editor Joe Savago's review of *Contact* by Carl Sagan illustrates these criteria. Similar to a traditional review, it begins by discussing fictional elements, such as the novel's characterization. Savago writes that "the protagonist/heroine, the astrophysicist Ellie is a good hearted, fiercely professional, feminist woman." He goes on to explain, though, that it was "'an enchanting book

which does in its way what literature, acc, to some, spozed to do, Instruct and Delight'" (qtd. in Radway *Feeling for Books* 31). By promoting the ideas that reading should be enjoyable, education, and accessible, Scherman helped to solidify middlebrow culture.

By contrast, literary gatekeepers ignore the lowbrow or popular. Most scholars agree that its primary focus is on entertainment. Consumers simply want to enjoy themselves, focusing on their base emotions. Lynes writes that a lowbrow reader "knows what he likes, and he doesn't care why he likes it." As a result, the author argues that the lowbrow is "oblivious" to aesthetic standards (Lynes 318). To illustrate these points, Lynes gives the example of jazz. The musician does not plan what to make beforehand. Rather, improvisation is a pure expression of whatever he or she feels in that moment (Lynes 318). On the other hand, Russel Nye asserts that lowbrow artists are actually very self-conscious; however, their standards are attuned to the masses. Lowbrow authors often rely on the same storylines and stock characters in order to appeal to the widest audience possible, according to Nye. This leads to the final characteristic of the lowbrow. Nye writes "The popular artist…subjects primarily to the law of supply and demand; his aim is to win the largest possible audience in the marketplace" (Nye 5). In other words, artists care more about sales than quality.

<div align="center">History of Genre Fiction</div>

Genre fiction then is typically dismissed as lowbrow, viewed as being too standardized and focused on entertainment. Suspicion of genre fiction is intimately intertwined with the history of paperback publishing. Before the invention of the printing press, literacy was almost exclusively reserved for the wealthy. Books had to be made by hand and paper was expensive.

For this reason, the rich were some of the few who could afford them (Finkelstein and McCleery 57). In addition, much reading which took place was religious in nature (Finkelstein and McCleery 31). Book scholars David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery write that "throughout the first millennium of the Christian calendar, writing in Western Europe would remain contained within the ecclesiastical sphere" (31). Books at the time were viewed as a means of spreading Christianity (Finkelstein and McCleery 30). This idea started to change with the invention of the printing press and advancements in paper-making and type-setting; they made the creation and distribution of books easier. In addition, transporting books became less difficult with the development of the railway (Radway *Reading* 22). As books spread, so did literacy rates. However, as reading became a widely-accepted practice, publishers began releasing a variety of materials, not just the best of the best. As a result, the "sacred" quality of books started to diminish (Miller location 292).

Early lowbrow fiction largely took the form of story papers. Launched in 1839, they were only about eight pages long (Denning 10-11). Story papers were also extremely cheap, costing around five cents. They initially did not possess the stigma that lowbrow fiction has now. Story papers were geared to all readers, from children to adults. For this reason, book history scholar Michael Denning writes that they included a little bit of everything like "correspondence, brief sermons, humor, fashion advice, and bits of arcane knowledge" (10). However, this was when paperback publishing first came to be associated with genre fiction. Different writing categories had long existed. However, story papers made them more visible in the form of serialized fiction (Denning 11). Each story paper published just a portion of a novel.

Readers had to buy the newest edition in order to find out what happened next. These storylines

usually featured plots with a significant amount of action—robberies and such. Story papers

eventually expanded, though, to include other categories of writing such as romance and

mystery. They did not feature much violence, though, and the bad language was minimized in

order to appeal to a broad audience. The very first story paper, *Brother Jonathan,* was launched

in 1839 (Denning 10). It became so popular that it soon had many imitators (Denning 11).

Newspapers were eventually eclipsed by dime novels as readers demanded more and

more materials. They were longer in length, measuring between fifty and one hundred pages.

Dime novels were only released once a month, though, because they took more time to produce.

In addition, they were more narrow in scope. Dime novels focused exclusively on genre fiction.

One of the most widely known at the time was *Beadles*, launched in 1842 (Denning 11). The

publisher started by only releasing westerns. *Beadles* became so popular, however, that it began

publishing other genres as well (Denning 13). While not the first, *Beadles* helped to establish the

dime novel format, according to Nye (201). One of the ways that it did this was by putting a

"lurid illustration" on the covers (Nye 2010). This eventually became common practice among

imitators who were quick to cash in on *Beadles'* success. Dime novels became so popular, in

fact, that by the late 1800s, millions were in circulation (Nye 10).

Because of their immense popularity, though, dime novels were viewed with deep

suspicion. Denning writes that they were "a body quite separate from the genteel fiction of the

Victorian middle class" (12). Because of their exciting storylines, people feared that dime novels

would cause moral degeneration among readers. There were even a couple of attempts at

limiting their circulation (Denning 51). For example, Anthony Comstock started the Society or the Suppression of Vice which was dedicated to "prohibiting the mailing of obscene, indecent, and vulgar material" (Denning 50). While the organization focused on movies, it also targeted books. New York State even proposed legislation outlawing their sale to minors (Denning 51). It stated "Any person who shall sell, loan, or give to any minor under sixteen-years of age any dime novel or book of fiction, without first obtaining the written consent of the parent or guardian of such minor…[is] guilty of a misdemeanor." While the law did not pass, it is indicative of the moral climate at the time (Denning 51). Society feared that dime novels caused moral corruption among readers.

The media only fueled people's fears about dime novels. For example, an article that appeared in the *Workingman's Advocate* during the late nineteenth century compared their effects to other social ills, stating that dime novels "are not doing less in their work of ruin than the rum-shop or the house of ill fame'" (qtd. in Denning 42). Their reputation was so bad that librarians tried to keep dime novels out of their collections, fearing that they would cause immoral behaviors among patrons. Samuel Green, a librarian in Massachusetts during the mid-twentieth century, stated that he did not mind patrons reading for enjoyment. However, dime novels were an exception because they were "'bloody and exciting.'" His fear could have had something to do with a series of murders which occurred around this same time. A fourteen-year-old Boston-area boy named Jesse Pomeroy was found guilty of murder. He was quoted as saying that "he had always been a great reader of blood and thunder stories, having read probably sixty 'dime novels', all treating of scalping and deeds of violence." Pomeroy

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continued by stating that they had inspired his crime, and advised others to avoid dime novels (Denning 49). Again, this only contributed to the moral panic surrounding dime novels.

Criticism of the popular pamphlets did not stop there, though. Dime novels were also lambasted for being poorly written (Nye 20). According to Nye, the novels were formulaic (203). This can be seen looking at the titles for such works. The author writes that "Titles were divided by a semicolon, indicating the characters and the nature of the narrative" (Nye 203). He cites *Desperate Dan, the Dastard* and *Buffalo Bill's Fair Square Deal* as examples (Nye 203). In addition, something dramatic had to happen in every chapter. Heroes always won, though, even if their victories seemed forced (Nye 205). Speaking of heroes, characters displayed little development. Protagonists were always honest and brave. In addition, Nye states that authors also utilized a lofty style of writing. He states, "No one ever 'went,' but 'traversed': nothing was 'named' but 'derived its appellation'" (Nye 203). This was in stark contrast to the overly simple dialogue. Characters sometimes communicated using one word sentences (Nye 204). Such formulaic writing helped to hook readers, according to Nye. He states that readers liked to know what to expect. However, it cemented the idea that genre fiction is lowbrow, standardized for greater appeal.

While they did not last long, dime novels "served as a bridge between the popular novel of the nineteenth century and the magazine, paperback, and comic book of the twentieth" (Nye 210). They were quickly taken over by pulps in the early 1900s. The cheaply produced books were nicknamed "pulps" because they were printed on paper made out of coarse wood pulp. They were longer than dime novel but still short by today's standards-about 120 pages on

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average   However, pulps featured slightly nicer packaging with laminated covers (Nye 211).

Again, pulps largely focused on genre fiction. One of the most popular at the time was Frank

Munsey's *Argosy* which mostly featured adventure stories. Just a few years later, Smith

expanded operations to include other genres, publishing *Detective Story, Western Story*, and

Love Story. By this point, there were also over twenty other pulp magazines (Nye 211). Pulps

became so successful that over 20 million were sold per month (Nye 211). Increasingly, though,

they were shunned by literary gatekeepers. According to Nye, "Pulp stories were frankly mass

production items, written to a rather rigid formula, never realistic, never disturbing, never

disappointing" (211). In other words, they had to be lowbrow or readers would be disappointed.

Pulps gradually gave way to paperback books as they are known today. Book historian

Beth Luey explains that this shift began in 1939 when Robert de Graff started Pocket Books.

Later that year, Penguin Books launched its own paperback line as well. They were slightly

more expensive than pulps, averaging twenty-five cents in cost. Paperbacks were still so cheap,

though, that publishers had to sell mass quantities just to stay afloat (Luey 43). This reinforced

paperbacks' lowbrow status. In addition, as their numbers increased, so did criticism.

According to Laura Miller, "the paperbacks' cheap binding meant that they were disposable;

these were books that could be casually read, not collected as status symbols" (location 610).

Bookstores slowly incorporated paperbacks into their stock, wary of mixing classics with genre

works. Even then, distributors sometimes refused to carry the books if they contained offensive

language or sex (Luey 43). However, paperback fiction proved to be too lucrative to ignore. It

"grew phenomenally" during this time, selling 95 million titles every month (Luey 45).

Paperbacks also became even more deeply entwined with genre fiction as a result. Publishing

houses printed a mixture of classics and genre at first (Luey 44). However, the latter generated

the most revenue. Just a couple of decades later, genre fiction made up about two thirds of

paperback sales (Luey 46).

Paperback publishing reached new heights during the 1970s (Thompson 108). Publishers

started selling millions of dollars' worth every month as they streamlined and consolidated

operations, leading to the emergence of the bestseller. Many were genre works. Book historian

John Sutherland lists some of the most popular best sellers during this time; they included

everything from *Star Wars* to the *Exorcist*. This phenomenon bolstered the idea that genre is for

mass audiences. As Sutherland writes, "The best sellers…provides comfort, is therapy, offers

vicarious reward or stimulus" (34). By this time, though, paperback publishing had become a

common practice (Luey 47). Bookstores no longer refused to carry paperbacks; they generated

too much revenue (Luey 46-7). In fact, publishers started releasing all books in paperback

format during this time. Paperback publishing became especially popular among universities.

Luey writes that "university presses were issuing trade paperbacks to encourage classroom

adoption of their more popular titles" (46). They were viewed as a cheaper alternative for poor

college students trying to save money.

Now the stigma surrounding paperback publishing had disappeared completely; all books

are printed in both hardback and paperback forms. Initially, books are published in hardback

because they generate more revenue. "Once hardback sales have slowed, a paperback edition is

released," according to *The Economist*. Publishers hope that the lower price will spur sales again

(C.C. par. 3). However, the negative view of genre fiction remains. Categories such as fantasy, science fiction, romance, and mystery are still thought to be for mass readers and to only offer entertainment. This attitude is prevalent in librarian Diane Tixier Herald's readers' advisory guide, *Genreflecting*. She outlines how librarians can speak about a range of writing styles, even if they have no knowledge about them. Herald clearly does not take genre fiction seriously, though. She describes how genre fiction is a guilty pleasure for literary gatekeepers. It is something that librarians read in their downtime, a clear deviation from their standard fare. As a result, Herald concludes that genre fiction is for "the common reader who seeks the simple pleasure of books" (Herald XVII). While she does not overtly condemn genre fiction, the message is clear—it deserves to be considered lowbrow.

Genre fiction's status as lowbrow fiction can also be seen looking at current literary anthologies. A work's inclusion indicates that is considered to have a certain amount cultural worth. In other words, the work is viewed as valuable enough to be taught in literature classes. However, recent anthologies largely exclude genre fiction. For example, the *Norton Anthology* is widely viewed as a leader within the field. The most recent version, the seventh edition, encompasses six volumes. It includes a couple of works by genre authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin who wrote science fiction and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman (*Norton* vi-xx). However, they are the only two out of hundreds of authors. The *Heath Anthology* is even worse. The sixth edition published in 2010 includes no genre works whatsoever (*Heath* v-xvii). This does not mean that they do not receive scholarly attention.   More recently, there has been a series of books published by university presses, focusing on different genres. For example, the

Cambridge Guide to Fantasy, the *Cambridge Guide to Science Fiction* and the *Cambridge Guide to Mystery* include essays by well-known scholars within their respective fields. However, the exclusion of genre fiction from major literary anthologies speaks to how it is viewed by the rest of the literary world. The writing categories are an afterthought, not worth being mentioned in the same breath as classics.

Despite being viewed as intended for mass audiences, genre fiction has seen greater acceptance in recent years. As a recent *Esquire* article entitled "How Genre Fiction Became More Important than Literary Fiction" posited, classifying book as either "genre" or "literary" creates a false dichotomy. Author Stephen Marche writes, "There are well-written books and badly written books...these distinctions are vastly more important than the distinction between the literary and the non-literary" (par. 2). In other words, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, and romance possess literary elements and vice versa; autonomous works contain characteristics of genre fiction. Genre fiction has even received greater acceptance from literary gatekeepers. Universities teach the occasional class on genre fiction. Libraries and bookstores also include more genre fiction in their collections. As a whole, though, it is still viewed as lowbrow. Libraries only carry more genre fiction because patrons demand it; bookstores feature it because genre fiction guarantees more revenue. As *New Yorker* columnist Arthur Krystal writes, the idea "that some genre writers write better than some of their literary counterparts doesn't automatically consecrate their books" (par. 6).

Categories such as fantasy, science fiction, romance, and mystery are still thought to be for mass readers and only offer entertainment. However, online reviews, especially book

bloggers, challenge the idea that genre fiction lacks complexity.   This dissertation examines this

phenomenon. It looks at twenty of Technorati's top ranked book blogs to see which genres they

examine and how. Do reviewers utilize the same criteria as mainstream publications or a

different set of standards? Many book bloggers in the sample focus on romance. Book Chick

City and the Book Cellar focus specifically on the genre. It often overlaps with young adult

fiction, another popular writing category. Many romances are geared to teens and vice

versa. Good Books & Good Wine and the Broke and Bookish look just at Young Adult

titles.   Jen Robinson's Book Page and There's a Book also occasionally cover fiction for teens.

Dribble of Ink, SF Signal and Upcoming4.me examine science fiction. Mystery was another

popular genre. Blogs include Do You Write under Your Own Name, The Rap Sheet, and

Existential Ennui. Pattinase sometimes examines mystery but talks about other genres as

well.   Forbidden Planet is the only blog that reviews comics.   By focusing on genre, bloggers

hint that it can adhere to certain lowbrow characteristics; namely, genre fiction offers enjoyment.

However, bloggers also reveal that it is much more than standardized entertainment. It takes

time to develop a number of fictional elements, not just one or two.

Romance

The most popular genre among bloggers is romance.   Scholar Kristin Ramsdell defines a

romance as "'a love story in which the central focus is on the development and satisfactory

resolution of the love relationship between the two main characters'" (qtd. in Saricks 132).

Despite its popularity, romance is also one of the most looked down-on genres. Author Maya

Rodale describes how it is viewed in *Dangerous Books for Girl: The Bad Reputation of Romance*

Novels. She states that she conducted a study to see how readers and nonreaders of the genre view it. Non-readers stated that it was "'fluff'" and possessed "'lesser quality writing and vocabulary" (31). Romance readers in her study obviously did not agree with this sentiment. However, even they acknowledged that the genre has a bad reputation. According to the author, almost ninety percent of participants stated that it is viewed negatively. These attitudes are also prevalent looking at media coverage of romance. It is rarely written about by major review publications, per Rodale. When it is, newspapers describe it condescendingly. Articles refer to romance novels as "'bodice rippers'" and "'mommy porn'" (35). Rodale writes that these "phrases diminish the genre by reducing it to 'just the naughty' bits and insult the reader by implying that they're reading smut" (Rodale 35).

The history of romance is long, preceding the printing revolution. It first emerged during medieval times with the creation of courtly love. Marriage at the time was largely a matter of convenience. According to experts of the time period, it was "the result of business interest or the seal of a power alliance" ("Courtly Love" par. 2). Romance was rarely a consideration in these arrangements. Courtly love, though, was a way for many people to express their hidden desires. Author Andre Capellanus outlined the rules of this practice in the twelfth century ("Courtly Love" par. 4). They included tenets such as "Nothing forbids one woman from being loved by two men or one man by two women" (Capellanus 186). However, a married person must never act on his or her desires because adultery is a sin (Capellanus 122). Stories of courtly love expressing these ideals proliferated during medieval times. They largely featured stories of knights trying to woo noblewomen. An example of courtly love is the legend of King Arthur.

His wife, Queen Guinevere, falls in love with Sir Lancelot (Kay 81). As a result, romance thereafter was associated with acts of chivalry. Courtly love, though, became especially popular in the form of poetry. Troubadours wrote poems about lovelorn knights which they then performed for noblemen and women (Crawford location 236).

A new type of romance, though, emerged in the late 1700s--the sentimental or domestic novel (Modleski 4). It differed from courtly love in a few ways. First and foremost, every scene is designed to incite emotion, whether fear, excitement, or happiness, in readers (Regis 113). In addition, sentimental novels are narrated from a different point of view. Romances stopped focusing on the exploits of lovelorn men, instead telling stories from the perspective of women. Finally, the characterization in sentimental novels is vastly different. Men are much more aggressive than in courtly love poems (Crawford location 264). According to romance scholar Tania Modleski, sentimental novels all followed the same basic format. The heroine is usually of a lower social status than the hero. She "holds out against his attacks on her 'virtue' until he sees no other recourse than to marry her" (Modleski location 539). The novel *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson is a prime example. The titular character is a maid for a wealthy man named Mr. B. He kidnaps and holds Pamela hostage until she falls in love with him and agrees to get married (Regis 63). Gothic romances also emerged around this same time. They were almost identical to sentimental novels. Scholar Joseph Crawford, though, asserts that gothic romances featured more supernatural elements (location 332).

There was much concern about romance's effects on women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to reader reception scholar Kate Flint, this is evident

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looking at the amount of written criticism which proliferated during this time. In addition,

advice manuals grew in popularity, suggesting respectable titles for women to read.   They

expressed two kinds of fears about romance, per Flint. First, critics thought that the genre would

encourage immoral behaviors because of their exciting storylines.   They did not think that

women could discern between fiction and real life. Even worse, critics worried that romance

would teach women "politically seditious attitudes, especially, but not exclusively challenging

the role of the family and the position of women in relation to authority" (Flint 24). Such was

the plot line of a popular sentimental novel at the time, *Adeline Mowbray*. The title character

reads John Locke, leading her to reject marriage completely. Adeline learns her lesson, though,

when she is eventually left penniless and alone. So widespread was the concern about romance

that even Mary Wollstonecraft expressed in the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* that the

genre promoted "'a romantic twist of mind'" (qtd. in Flint 25).

     While romance had long existed, it became more visible with the emergence of dime

novels. Popular titles at the time included *A Heart Unclaimed, An American Don Juan*, and *Her

Love or Her Life* ("1870-1890"). They featured plots similar to many sentimental novels.

Instead of exploring women's innermost thoughts and feelings, though, the novels focused more

significantly on action. Dime novels were often about weddings gone awry. According to the

American Women's Dime Novel Project, they featured "false marriages, marriages to bigamists,

marriages by 'false' officials, marriages to unloved men out of a sense of duty, marriages to the

right man for the wrong reasons, and marriages between lovers who are then immediately

separated." In addition, a common theme among dime novel romances was preserving heroines'

virginity. Women's purity was always a theme within the genre. However, it became even more pronounced in dime novels ("American Women's" par. 26). Despite this focus on morality, romance drew ire from critics who worried that dime novels would encourage women to take the lead when courting men instead of the other way around. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe once called them "'seductive and dangerous'" ("American Women's" par. 33).

While romance had existed for a long time, the genre only really solidified in the 1920s (Crawford location 749). This was due to a large influx of women into the workforce as a result of World War I. A side effect of this was that they had more disposable income to spend on books. Publishing houses realized that the genre could be used as a marketing category (Crawford location 753). Around this time, romance pulps also became popular. Nye writes that "some publishers took advantage of the postwar frankness about sex to introduce a different kind of pulp, the 'snappy'" (214). It was sexually charged without being too explicit. Titles included *Snappy Stories, Saucy Stories,* and *Spicy Stories*. However, most pulp romances were relatively chaste. Unlike dime novels, they were less about weddings and more about finding a good husband. Pulps also reflected many people's anxieties about women entering the workforce. Namely, the heroines were all usually secretaries, waitresses, and maids (Nye 212). According to Nye, though, the writing in these novels was formulaic. Namely, pulps all featured the same plot points. Boy meets girl; the two fight but eventually make up (Nye 213). Neither of these helped romance's reputation.

However, the real birth of romance is thought to be the 1970s when Harlequins became popular (Crawford location 890). They are a type of romance known for featuring significantly

less sex. Harlequins largely followed the same formula established by sentimental novels in the

1700s--a woman of a lower status wins the affection of a well-to-do man (Modleski 27).

However, they featured much gentler storylines; men no longer aggressively pursued women.

The Harlequin publishing company was launched in 1949 by Richard Bonnycastle. He

originally released all kinds of genres. However, Harlequin approached Mills & Boon, a British

publisher, in the late 1950s about rereleasing some of its romances (Radway *Feeling* 39). The

partnership was so successful that the two eventually merged in the 1970s (Faircloth par. 24).

While Harlequin enjoyed a lot of success, the publisher skyrocketed when it was taken over by

Larry Heisey, a former ad man for Procter and Gamble. He applied the same marketing

techniques that he used for products like soap to romances (Radway *Feeling* 39-40). For

example, he began advertising the books on television and in print. According to journalist

Kelly Faircloth, "After the TV advertising push, sales jumped 30 million books in two years,

hitting 72 million in 1975" (Faircloth par. 31). However, the popularity of Harlequins and their

perception as adhering to a strict formula only solidified their position as lowbrow.

Harlequins were in stark contrast to another type of romance which became popular at the

time-the bodice ripper or "erotic paperback romances with historical settings, often featuring

some level of non-consensual sexual violence" (Crawford location 907). The subgenre was

single handled launched by Katherine Woodwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* (Crawford location

882). The novel featured graphic sex scenes which had not been seen in romances before this

point (Crawford location 907).   It is about sea captain Brandon Birmingham who kidnaps a

woman named Heather. He holds her captive until she falls in love with him. She is raped but

that does not keep her from eventually falling in love with the hero. Since their creation in the

1970s, bodice rippers have changed dramatically. Namely, the theme of rape has died out

(Rodale 93). However, bodice rippers still feature erotically charged scenes, leading many

people to compare romance to "literary porn" (Rodale 33).

The last two decades have seen the emergence of a variety of romance subcategories.

One of the most popular is paranormal romance. It is defined as "romantic fictions which feature

overtly supernatural element: ghosts, vampires, angels, werewolves, fairies, wizards, and so on"

(Crawford location 196). Romance has long included supernatural elements, going back to the

inception of gothic novels. However, paranormal romance only solidified as a distinct category

in the early 1990s. This was when the Romance Writers of America created an award for "Best

futuristic/fantasy/paranormal romance" (Crawford location 1323). Around this time, Harlequin

also launched a separate line of books, Silhouette Shadows, focusing on the paranormal

(Crawford location 1306). The subgenre really saw a boom in sales, though, with the success of

the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Myers. The author is attributed with making the genre a

household name. Joseph Crawford writes, "Collectively, the impact of Twilight and its imitators

have decisively changed the face of contemporary vampire fiction" (Crawford location 4283).

Since the release of the series, paranormal romance has become a staple in many bookstores.

Because romance is viewed as standardized, it has long been rejected by literary

gatekeepers. Even scholarly research on the genre makes it seem one-dimensional. For

example, romance did not receive much attention from academia until Janice Radway published

Reading the Romance in 1984. She interviewed several customers at a small bookstore in the

Midwestern town of Smithton about why they read the genre. Over and over again, participants

in the study mentioned the word "escape." Responses included statements such as "'They are

light reading—escape literature—I can put down and pick up effortlessly" and simply

"Escapism" (Radway *Feeling* 88). Sometimes the women meant this figuratively. They said

that they read romance to be swept away to new places. Others used the word "escape" literally.

Many participants were stay-at-home moms. Reading was their reprieve from the day-to-day

demands of tending to their families (Radway 90). While Radway was the first academic to

celebrate romance, her study paints a very narrow view of the genre. It appears as if escape is

the only thing that defines the genre.

Plots in romance novels are also dismissed as lacking depth. For example, Pamela Regis

outlines everything that a good romance storyline should entail. First, she states the author must

establish a setting. Next, the heroine and hero meet (Regis 31). However, there is usually some

kind of barrier that keeps the two from consummating their love, Regis' next element. (Regis

32). Fourth, the heroine and hero are attracted to each other. Regis writes that "The attraction

keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier" (Regis 33). Fifth, the

two main characters declare their love for each other (Regis 34). Sixth, there is the "point of

ritual death" when it seems like they will never end up together (Regis 35). However, in the

"recognition" phase, the heroine and hero realize that they can overcome any obstacles to their

love (Regis 36). Finally, the heroine and hero get married. Regis concludes that this is not

always a requirement for modern romances (37). However, the two main characters must end up

together in some capacity (Regis 38). While Regis' analysis is detailed, her analysis does little

advance the plight of the genre. It appears that anyone can write a romance by following the

right steps.

In addition, romance novel characterization is typically seen as flat. Scholar Kay Mussell

perpetuates this idea in her study of the genre, *Fantasy and Reconciliation*. She begins by saying

that heroines in romances have to pass "the domestic test." This means that they must be seen as

good mothers and homemakers (Mussel 89). The domestic test has evolved as women's roles in

society change (Mussel 90). For example, more women have jobs and choose to remain

childless. This reality is reflected in many romance novels. However, Mussell writes that

heroines have to justify why they do not pass the domestic test (Mussel 91). In addition, women

are still portrayed as nurturing, but this quality is expressed in other ways. For example, Mussell

states that female characters usually have some kind of caregiver occupation such as teacher or

veterinarian.   In addition, romance authors often include descriptions "of the homey apartment

she has decorated herself with little money or when she expresses her appreciation for beautiful

objects" (Mussel 104).   These show that the heroine has the potential to make a good wife and

homemaker.

Radway goes into more detail about developing characters in *Reading the Romance*.

However, her description is just as flat as Mussel's. The author also interviewed the Smithton

women about what makes a good romance. Participants stated that they look for several qualities

in characters. Heroines all have to be "intelligent and independent" (Radway *Romance* 78-79).

This makes their eventual surrender to heroes all the more effective (Radway *Romance* 80).   It

shows that their love was meant to be. In addition, readers can identify with heroines more

easily as a result, enhancing the escape which romances offer. Everyone wants to imagine themselves as smart and possessing a lot of agency. Similarly, romance heroes have to adhere to a set of characteristics. The Smithton women reported that they might seem cold and aloof at first (Radway Romance 128). However, heroes are ultimately revealed to be smart and tender (Radway *Romance* 82). Again, this serves an important purpose; it shows the heroine's ability to transform the hero with her love (Radway *Romance* 129). However, Radway's descriptions of characters also make them seem one-dimensional. They all have to be likable in order to be perceived as well-written. The Smithton women, and perhaps readers in general, do not want to deviate from these tropes.

Bloggers, though, actively change the perception that romance is poorly written by treating it seriously. They still celebrate reading for escape. However, bloggers look for all of the same elements of fiction which traditional reviewers utilize—plot, characterization, tone, setting, and style. They assert that romance authors develop a number of these elements, not just one or two. This was clear in one Book Chick City Review of *Own the Wind* by Kristen Ashley, the second book in the Motorcycle Man series. It is about the romance between two members of the Chaos Motorcycle Club, Tabby, the daughter of the club's president, and Shy (Laura par. 2). The novel follows Tabby as she evolves from a party girl to a responsible woman. Tabby eventually leaves the club to become a nurse. However, she returns to the club when her husband dies. Shy, of course, is there to comfort her (Laura par. 3).

Blogger Laura begins by describing the novels characterization. Initially, she does little to subvert the idea that characters typically adhere to molds. Tabby clearly passes the domestic

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test. She works as a nurse which is considered to be a nurturing occupation. To counterbalance this, Tabby is also "feisty and had some serious biker girl cool." However, this is another common characteristic of romance heroines (Laura par. 4). Shy even adheres to stereotypes about romance heroes. Laura writes that he "completely had the alpha hero thing down" (par. 5).

The love story between Tabby and Shy also follows many of the steps as outlined by Ramsdell.   It slowly builds over the course of the novel. Several obstacles keep the two from consummating their love. For example, Laura writes that the couple often fights (Laura par. 5). However, this does not matter because the love which they share is unwavering. Readers can be assured that the two will ultimately end up with each other.

A closer look at Laura's review, though, reveals that Tabby is more than a stereotypical romance heroine. The blogger writes that she evolves from a party girl to a woman over the course of the novel. Rarely do readers get to see heroines in romance novels evolve so dramatically, per scholars. In addition, Ashley provides an intimate look at the heroine as she grieves the loss of her first husband. Laura writes, "You watch Tabby grow and grieve and completely admire her strength" (Laura par. 4). To accomplish this, the story covers a wide range of time, sometimes fast forwarding months and even years. By covering such a wide range of time, the author enhances Tabby's characterization even more. According to Laura, "It…added credit to her grief." This also counters a popular stereotype about the genre. Romance is thought to only provide escape. By graphically depicting Tabby's grief, though, the author shows that characters can be much more complex (Laura par. 6).

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In addition, *Own the Wind* explores the back stories of secondary characters. It is believed that romance novels rarely look at anyone other than the hero and heroine. Ramsdell asserts that it is their blossoming romance that drives the story. Developing other characters would only take away from this element of the plot. However, Ashley takes time fleshing out the relationships between the biker gang members. This adds to the sense of family that they share, according to the blogger (Laura par. 9). It also counters the widely-held belief that romance novels have limited character development.

The blogger also takes a close look at Tabby's friend Natalie, a heroin addict. Laura admits that she disliked this part to a certain degree. It made her sad, in addition to the fact that it did not fit into the story well. Laura states, "I'm not sure if Ashley is setting Natalie up as a future heroine in the series or a future bad apple." However, the blogger goes on to write that does not want to judge this aspect of the novel yet; first, she wants to see what the author has intended for the character (Laura par. 8). The review is still revealing, though, because it shows that romance novels are more than just a vehicle for escape; the genre can explore tough issues such as drug abuse as well.

This does not mean that the book does not display lowbrow characteristics. The blogger gushes about the novel, stating, "Her writing is completely and utterly addictive, the type of writing bookaholics dream of, when you need more hours in the day just to fit in more reading in, because you just can't get enough of it" (Laura par. 1). Her effusive writing conveys a deep sense of enjoyment, an element of the lowbrow. Laura also compares Ashley's portrayal of the motorcycle club to that on *Sons of Anarchy*. She mentions that there were even a few allusions

to the wildly popular television show in the book (Laura par. 7). This implies that the *Own the Wind* might also be mass entertainment. Even still, the blogger gives the book a resounding recommendation of four out of five stars (Laura par. 11).

While bloggers in the sample reviewed all types of romance, they primarily focused on paranormal romance, again subverting the idea that all books within the genre lack complexity. A good example of such a review looks at *Firelight* by Kristen Callihan. The Broke and the Bookish blogger Julia describes it as "*Phantom of the Opera* meets *Beauty and the Beast* with a dash of paranormal a pinch of suspense" (par. 1). It is about a woman named Miranda Ellis who possesses magical abilities (Julia par. 3). When her family loses its fortune, she has no other choice but to marry Lord Benjamin Archer. People fear him because he wears a mask to hide his deformed face. Miranda, though, sees beyond the mask. When Lord Archer is accused of several murders, she uses her magical abilities to discover the real killer (Julia par. 4).

The blogger seems to be aware of how other people look down on paranormal romance. To make up for it, she has her own system for systematically analyzing the subgenre. The scale includes five elements: story, character development, the book's overview, romance, and execution. Right away, it becomes clear that the novel challenges many preconceptions about the subgenre. Namely, it rejects the boy-meets-girl formula. Julia explains that the novel is reminiscent of *Phantom of the Opera*. However, Callihan puts a new spin on the "masked man" story. She does not go into much detail about what this means exactly. However, it is clear that *Firelight* does not have a typical romance plot.

The novel is not without its faults. Julia continues by asserting that the writing is awkward at times. The author tells too much in a way that seems "info dumpy." Other times, she did not tell enough. For example, the blogger states that Callihan does not explain the rules of how magic works in the book's world, making some of the action seem random. Still, these characteristics do not take away from the overall story, according to the blogger. She writes that it is "extremely addictive and quite enjoyable" (Julia par. 8). However, this also hints that the book might be lowbrow.   Her enjoyment of the novel is not just literary; it is based in some form of escape.

Any faults with the story are made up by the characters' development, though. The blogger writes that Miranda and Lord Archer have a nice rapport with each other. Even so, the existence of one does not hinge on the other, like in so many depictions of romance. Julia writes that they are fully fleshed out people. Sometimes the heroine and hero were a little too stubborn for the blogger's liking. However, this is only further proof that paranormal romance can actually be complex. Most romance characters are expected to be likable. Miranda and Lord Archer, though, do not fit neatly into this mold. Julia also states that the secondary characters could be better developed (Julia par. 9).   Overall, though, she views the novel's character development favorably.

Only after addressing the story and character development does Julia tackle how the romance was developed. The blogger explains that the author does a good job of building tension between the two main characters.   Julia writes, "Holy hell, was the tension palpable!!" However, she also explains that Callihan does not rely too much on this. She spends just as

much time developing Miranda and Lord Archer as characters. Julia writes that "Miranda and Archer worked well together, and I thought they were a great leading team." (Julia par. 10). Interestingly, this is just a small portion of the review. Julia spends much more time unpacking the storyline and characterization than the development of romance. This subtly sends a message to readers—romance is an important part of the novel, but not the most important.

Julia concludes that the book's overall execution "has room for improvement." However, it is great for a debut novel. She states "'I've read so many new authors who just lose it in the details or retell a story that has been told so many times it holds no interest. This is not the case with Firelight" (pars 11-12).   The blogger liked it so much that she already bought the sequel, *Moonglow* (Julia pars. 11-12). Even though Julia finds flaws with the books, the review is still significant, perhaps even more so because it is somewhat negative. Many people think that romance readers only want escape. However, Julia's review demonstrates that they can be just as critical as mainstream reviewers.

Another blogger who asserts the worth of paranormal romance is Rebecca at Book Chick City. Her review of Kathryne Kennedy's *Double Enchantment* also shows that the subgenre is multilayered. It is part of the Relics of Merlin series. However, the book can also be read as a standalone, according to the blogger (Rebecca "Double" par. 1). It is about Lady Jasmina Karlyle whose mother steals the jewelry of other noblewomen (Rebecca par. 3). One day, she takes a brooch that used to belong to Merlin (Rebecca "Double" par. 5). Lady Karlyle possesses the magic ability to create a double of herself (Rebecca "Double" par. 4)   The brooch intensifies this power. One day, Jasmina's double develops a mind of her own, attending a ball where she

seduces Sir Sterling Thorn (Rebecca "Double" par. 5). The nobleman discovers the truth about his new love interest the following morning. However, he becomes desperate to find the real noblewoman (Rebecca "Double" par. 6).

The book challenges stereotypes about romance in a few ways. Like *Firelight*, it has a complex plot. Kennedy's novel takes several twists and turns, many of them unrelated to the romance between Jasmina and Sterling. Even the blogger was surprised by this. She writes that "the plot thickens and becomes more complex than I first anticipated" (Rebecca "Double" par. 7). The blogger's shock hints that even she, a lover of romance, might hold some stereotypical ideas about the genre. However, this ultimately makes the review more effective. It demonstrates that the plot construction is so good, the reviewer does not care.

In addition, Jasmina appears to be more well-rounded than the typical romance heroine. She is not defined solely by her connection to Sterling. For example, it becomes clear that the protagonist has a rebellious streak. However, her character development does not end there. The author slowly develops Jasmina's character over the course of the story. Rebecca writes, "As a heroine, Jasmina had many layers to her character and it made this a fun read as different aspect of her character came to light." For example, later in the novel it becomes clear she is not so rebellious after all. In fact, Jasmina actually cares very deeply about defending her family's reputation (Rebecca "Double" par. 9). A typical stock character could not be revealed in this way.

In addition, scholars posit that a good romance takes time building the tension between the main characters. Kennedy, though, smashes this formula at the very beginning of the novel.

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Sterling falls in love with Jasmina's double right away. The blogger admits that she had a little trouble with this plot device. Rebecca writes, "My main problem with book one was the instantaneous romance between the two characters" ("Double" par. 8). This speaks volumes to how much a love story that builds gradually is ingrained into how people view the genre. However, it also reveals the author's creativity; she cannot be contained by a formula.

Finally, the blogger writes that the novel incorporates a lot of humor, something that is not usually expected in romance. The blogger states, "this book has some great comic scenes." These are in large part due to Nuisance and Trouble, a couple of fun-loving gnomes. Their hijinks help to relieve some of the tension between Jasmina and Sterling, according to the blogger (Rebecca "Double" par. 12). This might seem like an insignificant detail in the review. Humor is not something mainstream reviewers usually analyze. Again, though, it demonstrates the inventiveness of the genre. Authors are constantly pushing the boundaries of romance, whether people realize it or not.

This does not mean that everything that the blogger asserts is accurate. Her comments about the novel are obviously biased at times. For example, Rebecca describes Sterling in such a way that makes him seem multi-faceted. She writes, "Sir Sterling Thorn was also full of depth." However, he clearly conforms to the idea that romance heroes should be cold and aloof. He is very gruff with Jasmina at first, a common romance tactic for building tension between characters. (Rebecca "Double" par. 10). Despite this, Rebecca's review of *Double Enchantment* is a good example of paranormal romance's complexity. It still challenges several stereotypes about the genre. The storyline and characters are intricate; it even features some humor.

Finally, a Book Chick City review of *The Trouble with Fate* by Leigh Evans reveals the complex nature of paranormal romance. Blogger Rebecca gives the book four out of five stars ("Trouble" par. 13). It is about Hedi Peacock who works as a barista at Starbucks (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 2). While her life appears to be ordinary, it is anything but. Hedi plays a pivotal role in the ongoing war between werewolves and fairies. Her supernatural parents were killed and her twin brother was kidnapped when she was a child (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 3). Now she must protect the entry way into the fairy world from being attacked (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 4). Despite this, Hedi starts to fall in love with Robson Trowbridge, her childhood crush and a full-blooded werewolf (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 5).

The most interesting part of the review is Rebecca's criticism of the love story. The blogger writes that she was not convinced by the romance between Hedi and Rob. She cannot believe that the heroine sustained her crush for over ten years since her childhood. This is compounded by the fact that he did something that would be unforgivable to most people. The blogger does not mention what it is exactly because she does not want to spoil the plot for readers. However, she implies that Rob somehow contributed to the death of Hedi's parents and her brother's kidnapping. Both of these factors make their romance seem forced, according to the blogger. She writes, "As much as we all like the thought of our teenage crush suddenly noticing us, in this book it just didn't feel as romantic as it should have" (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 10). Despite the blogger's criticism, the review is still revealing. It demonstrates that a convincing love story does not have to be the primary focus of a romance novel. Otherwise, Rebecca would not have given the novel an almost perfect rating.

The blogger also comments on a few elements which she enjoyed about the novel. First, Rebecca writes that it "twists the paranormal as we know it and reshapes it" ("Trouble" par. 1). By focusing on the interaction between werewolves and fairies, the blogger puts a new spin on paranormal romance. Rebecca also comments on the complexity of the setting, an element not usually associated with the genre (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 7). Finally, the blogger states that the novel contains "several twists and turns" (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 11). One of these twists is a "heartbreaking ending." This refutes the idea that romance only offers escape. It can explore complex emotions as well (Rebecca "Trouble" par. 12). These points demonstrate that romance as a genre can be multifaceted.

<div align="center">Fantasy</div>

Fantasy was another popular genre among bloggers. It can be difficult to define because literature has always included fantastic elements. Usually, though, it "contains unrealistic settings, or magic, often set in a medieval universe, or possibly involving mythical beings or supernatural forms as a primary element of the plot, theme, or setting" ("Fantasy Fiction Genre" par. 2). It has typically been treated with higher regard than writing categories like mystery, science fiction, and romance. The history of fantasy is longer and therefore viewed as more reputable. However, the genre has long been considered lowbrow. This can be seen tracing the history of fantasy's development. Again, the genre's creation predates paperback publishing. Some scholars cite Homer's *Odyssey* as one of the first fantasy works (Mendlesohn and James location 131). His tale of monsters paved the way for the creation of the genre. Fantasy did not start to solidify until the Middle Ages, though, with the emergence of fairy tales. Society now

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thinks of them as children's lore. However, fairy tales were originally written for adults, drawing on sometimes gruesome Celtic legends (Mendlesohn and James location 177). For example, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales were initially very violent (Mendlesohn and James locations 168-254). They were only toned down more recently to appeal to a younger audience.

Fantasy began to be considered a distinct writing category in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It gained acceptance in Britain largely because of children's literature. Popular works at the time included *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan, the Jungle Book, The Wind in the Willows, Mary Poppins, The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* and *Winnie the Pooh* (Mendlesohn and James location 473). Now such books are considered to be classics. At the time, though, the novels were viewed with some suspicion because they were geared to a young audience. While fantasy started to gain recognition in the United Kingdom, its evolution in the United States was very different. There were some authors such as James Branch Cabell who were considered to be literary (Mendlesohn and James locations 628-638). However, the genre was mostly relegated to dime novels and pulp magazines. The most well-known at the time was *Weird Tales* (Mendlesohn and James location 563).   It launched the careers of now-famous authors like Robert Howard, creator of *Conan the Barbarian.* However, as James and Mendlesohn write in *The Cambridge Guide to Fantasy Literature*, "The pulp adventures…were like Busby Berkley musicals for the page: big, colorful, often non-sensical spectacles that proved to be the perfect antidote to the stock market crash, the dust bowl, the Depression." In other words, pulps were largely ignored by literary gatekeepers because they were considered lowbrow (James and Mendlesohn 46).

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Gradually, fantasy became more acceptable to read due to writers like J.R.R. Tolkein.

His *Lord of the Rings* series received acclaim from major publications like the *New York Herald Tribune* (Mendlesohn and James location 739). While the book was initially categorized as children's literature, it reflected the anxiety of many adults at the time. Namely, the Hobbit was viewed as a metaphor for World War II. Bilbo Baggins, the title creature, is forced to leave his home due to a magical war (Mendlesohn and James location 713). C.S. Lewis, a friend of Tolkein's, also helped people to realize the legitimacy of fantasy. His *Chronicles of Narnia* books were also categorized as writing for children. However, his novels incorporated themes about Christianity which adults could appreciate. Due to the popularity of these novels, publishers realized that fantasy had the ability to generate revenue. James and Mendlesohn write that "admirers were keen to write more of the same" (James and Mendlesohn 72). Publishers quickly took advantage of this trend, publishing more and more fantasy (James and Mendlesohn 73). Even Tolkein had his critics, though. Michael Moorcock wrote that *Lord of the Rings* was "'the prose of the nursery room…meant to soothe and console…It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions'" (qtd. in James and Mendlesohn 72).

Fantasy did not see any real recognition from literary gatekeepers until the 1960s with the creation of magical realism. The term was coined in the 1920s by painter Franz Roh to describe works which combine the real and surreal (James and Mendlesohn 170). However, it was only applied to literature in the 1960s by literary critic Angel Flores. Slowly, the movement gained popularity with the publication of works such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Mendlesohn and James location 2064). His story about the Buendia family won the

Pulitzer Prize. Other authors such as Isabelle Allende and Joyce Carol Oates contributed to "a growing sense that fantasy could be literature" by publishing works that are considered a part of magical realism (Mendlesohn and James location 2064). As a result, academics started dedicating more time and attention to studying the genre. All of a sudden, there was a proliferation of criticism on fantasy as scholars tried to figure out how to best analyze it. For example, Tsvetan Todorov published *The Fantastic*: *A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in 1970; in 1973 author Ursula K. Le Guin published "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie"; and Colin Manlove published *Modern Fantasy* in 1975 (Sandner 135-56). This kind of attention helped to further legitimize the genre.

More recently, fantasy has seen the creation of new subcategories. For example, urban fantasy has become extremely popular, even more than traditional forms of the genre. It only surfaced as a separate category in the 1980s. Up until this point, magic had always occurred within its own world. Urban fantasy, though, mixes the fantastic with real life. John Clute and John Grant, authors of the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, write that it encompasses "texts where fantasy and the mundane world interact, intersect, and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly about a real city" (qtd. in Clute and Grant 141). Another common feature of these books is that they usually include supernatural creatures such as vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. As a result, the tone is darker than other forms of the genre. Clute and Grant cite Laurel K. Hamilton as an author who helped to shape the popular subcategory. Her books about a vampire hunter named Anita Blake are wildly successful (Clute and Grant 138). However, urban fantasy books are also looked down upon more than other forms of fantasy. They often feature

women fighting supernatural creatures, such as Blake's Vampire hunger series. Critics cite the inclusion of scantily clad women on the covers as proof that the subgenre is "trashy" (Saintcrow par. 11). Its dark, exciting storylines also arouse the fears of critics.

Despite this, fantasy has become a staple in popular culture over the last few decades. Mendlesohn and James attribute a lot of its success to film. Fantasy novels such as *The Dark Crystal* and *The Neverending Story* were turned into movies in the 1980s (Mendlesohn and James location 1834). More recently, books like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* have appeared on the big and small screens. Mendlesohn and James also credit the increasing popularity of fantasy to the Harry Potter books. The authors write, "the twenty-first century has seen an upsurge quantity and quality as publishers have realized that children do want fantastic fiction and that many adults are perfectly happy to read books written for a younger audience" (Mendlesohn and James location 3222). The success of the series drove people to look for other fantasy authors (Mendlesohn and James location 3221). However, the genre's popularity is a double-edged sword. It has pushed fantasy into the spotlight, but further toward the lowbrow. James and Mendlesohn write, "Fantasy has become big business, for better or worse" (76).

How should reviewers treat fantasy then? Many critics, including scholars of the genre, have outlined a few characteristics which readers should consider. For example, Mendlesohn writes that fantasy plots follow one of four templates. First, she states that there is the portal-quest fantasy. In this type of novel, the main character enters from the everyday world into a magical realm (Mendlesohn 23). Next, there is the immersive fantasy which posits a unique world that is completely self-contained (Mendlesohn 67). Third is the intrusion fantasy. In

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many ways, it is the opposite of the portal novel. The protagonist does not go to a far-off realm; instead, magic comes to the protagonist. In this case, though, it is a negative force that has to be defeated (Mendlesohn 108). Finally, the liminal fantasy is the "form of fantasy which estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist" (Mendlesohn 158). In other words, the reader never quite knows what is real and what is make-believe. While Mendlesohn's analysis is detailed, she does little to counter the idea that the genre lacks complexity. It appears as if anyone can write a fantasy novel as long as he or she follows the right formula.

Some critics argue that fantasy plots can be simplified even further. Genre scholar Anna Faktorovich writes that most fantasies follow the "Overcoming the Monster" storyline. Simply, the protagonist must overcome some kind of evil. The steps leading up to this point vary; however, they always follow the same basic outline. The protagonist encounters a series of obstacles, building to a showdown with a villain (1220). The antagonist can take a variety of forms. Faktorovich states, "This monster may take a human form (e.g., a giant or a witch); the form of an animal (a wolf, a dragon, a shark); or a combination of both (the Minotaur, the Sphinx)" (location 1211). Defeating the villain often seems impossible. However, good always triumphs (Faktorovich location 1220). Faktorovich writes that every fantasy bestseller follows this plot. She states, "You can insert almost any character names and place settings into this formula and it would fit the plots of nearly all popular…fantasy stories, including Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, and Twilight" (Faktorovich location 1220). Again, though, this makes the genre

appear to lack complexity. Faktorovich shows that fantasy plots can be reduced even further from a handful of storylines to a handful of steps.

Scholars of the genre make the characterization in fantasy novels also appear flat. For example, John Timmerman describes their development in *Other Worlds*. Like Faktorovich, he acknowledges that characters display a lot of variety; they can take the form of a human, animal, or mythical creature (Timmerman 31). As Timmerman explains, though, it is usually easy to identify villains. The author writes, "The danger on the one hand is that evil is represented simply by strange characters—dragons and ogres—who are readily identifiable as villains" (Timmerman 32). As a result, they often seem like stock characters. Similarly, protagonists follow a template—they are often very ordinary and naive (Timmerman 30). This serves as an important contrast to the grotesque nature of the villains. Namely, though, it provides an entry point for readers. As Timmerman says, "We are not asked to stand on the outside and survey this tale from detached perspective; we are asked to enter into it so that the story becomes ours. Thus we find characters quite like us" (Timmerman 29). It then becomes easier for them to get immersed in the story. However, this can also make fantasy characters appear diluted.

Settings in fantasy novels appear to possess a lot more depth compared to other elements, according to scholars. For example, Ann Swinfen outlines how to develop believable worlds in her study of the genre, *In Defence of Fantasy*. She writes that authors have "complete artistic freedom" (Swinfen 76). They can draw on real life when describing places. For example, C.S. Lewis modeled his world Narnia on medieval Europe. His characters battled using swords and rode horses (Swinfen 82). However, fantasy authors can also invent a world. All that matters is

that "its nature and laws must be self-consistent, and must be seen to operate consistently, of themselves." In addition, Swinfen states that settings possess varying levels of detail. She gives the example of Middle Earth as an example of one that is well developed. Tolkein includes maps showing every location. However, Swinfen notes that they are not necessary for readers to enter into another world because other factors play a role (Swinfen 75). For example, Swinfen explains that a setting's history and culture are just as important (82). A world can even have its own language, like Middle Earth where the residents speak elvish (Swinfen 85). All of these elements help readers to feel like they have entered another realm. More importantly, though, they paint fantasy as a complex genre.

Bloggers actively challenge the idea that the genre is not serious by showing that it develops several literary elements, not just setting.   At the same time, they demonstrate that the fantasy can simultaneously offer enjoyment. One example is a SF Signal review of *Scourge of the Betrayer* by Jeff Salyards. The book is about a shy scribe named Arkimondos who is hired to chronicle the adventures of Syldoon soldiers. Their leader, Captain Braylar Killcoin, is a fierce warrior. Despite their very different natures, Arkimondos and Killcoin form a tight bond (Sharps "Book Review: Scourge" par. 3).

Blogger Nick Sharps begins by describing the book's characterization. At first, the narrator, Arkimondos, seems innocent like so many other fantasy heroes. Sharps writes that he "is a naïve sort." However, it is revealed that other characters in the novel possess more depth, going beyond the good versus evil dichotomy outlined by scholars. Sharps goes on to explain Killcoin is complex, despite initially seeming like just "an intimidating bastard." He is capable

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of demonstrating extraordinary tenderness with Arkimondos and his squadron (Sharps "Book Review: Scourge" par. 8).

The blogger even likes how Salyards portrays secondary characters. He fleshes out soldiers who do not play a big role in the book through his use of dialogue, especially "the good natured bickering of Glesswick and Vendurro." It mimics the banter between people who have fought side by side, according to Sharps ("Book Review: Scourge" par. 10). This adds to the characters' realism; it also defies the stereotype that fantasy characters cannot be well-developed.

Sharps goes on to unpack a variety of other elements, namely, the novel's setting. Like Swinfen posits, it demonstrates considerable depth. The blogger writes, "the world building is organic and elegant" ("Book Review: Scourge" par. 7). He explains that the setting is reminiscent of medieval Europe. Salyards accomplishes this through a subtle use of magic; it is integrated so seamlessly that the book seems like historical fiction, not fantasy (Sharps "Book Review: Scourge" par. 12). This is solidified through the author's use of point of view. Sharps states that Arkimondos is "an ideal narrator" (Sharps "Book Review: Scourge" par. 7). Readers get to experience the world along with the scribe which adds to its authenticity.

The plot also appears to be more complex than stereotypical depictions of fantasy storylines. It does not fit neatly into a few steps. The storyline is action packed, featuring battle scenes between the Syldoon and other forces. However, the plot contains much more than fight scenes. It also hints at a larger impending conflict. In addition, Sharps explains that it is "dark and personal, punctuated by…political intrigue, black humor and even moments of surprising

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tenderness." In other words, Salyards uses the plot to explore a variety of emotions, something that is not usually associated with fantasy.

While the blogger's review is very professional, he cannot help but write effusively about the novel at times, hinting that the novel might also be lowbrow. At the very beginning, Sharps states that it made him say "Wow." He goes on to explain, "that's not a "wow" with an exclamation point, the kind of thing one might express when presented with a hot fudge brownie topped with ice cream and sprinkles. No. This is the sort of "wow" one makes when they discover an author they just *know* they will follow" (Sharps par. 5). The blogger circles back to this sentiment at the end of the review, speaking directly to the author. He writes, "Here's to Jeff Salyards and hoping for a successful sequel as soon as possible. Hear me Jeff? *Soon*!" (Sharps par. 14). These momentary lapses in tone speak to the depth of Sharps' enjoyment. He cannot contain his excitement about the novel.

Another example of a fantasy novel review looks at *Throne of the Crescent Moon* by Saladin Ahmed. Again, it challenges the idea that fantasy novels solely focus on setting. A Dribble of Ink blogger Justin Landon writes that the book is set in the fictional world of the Crescent Moon Kingdoms. The Falcon Prince wants to usurp the current ruler, Khalif. A series of supernatural murders only stokes the growing conflict. Doctor Adoulla Makhslood and his assistant Raseed bas Raseed spend the bulk of the novel trying to save Khalif's life, even though the blogger describes him as a "tyrannical ruler" (Landon "Review of Throne" par. 2).

Landon begins by acknowledging that he used to dislike this particular type of fantasy known as sword and sorcery. It relies heavily on descriptions of medieval times, featuring

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descriptions of knights riding horses. In a review for another novel, he "heavily criticized the sword and sorcery novel for lacking character, plot, and, well…substance." *Throne of the Crescent Moon* initially seemed like it would be shallow as well, according to the blogger. However, this novel made him view the subgenre differently (Landon "Crescent Moon" par. 1). The blogger's confession about his bias against sword and sorcery might seem like an unusual way to start a review. However, it makes Landon's assessment even more credible. It shows that he did not want to like the writing category. The novel was so well constructed, though, that he could not resist.

Only then does Landon jump into a detailed analysis of the novel's literary elements, starting with the characterization. The blogger writes that he did not enjoy Adoulla and Raseed because they "are world weary, cynical, and fatally flawed." Fantasy protagonists are supposed to be naive and, more importantly, likeable. This makes their eventual defeat of the villain especially meaningful. Adoulla and Raseed had to overcome much more than other characters in order to succeed. Even though Landon dislikes how the two main characters are developed, his comment speaks to their complexity. Adoulla and Raseed are much more complicated than a simple trope.

This leads Landon to a greater examination of the author's style.   Landon states that it is obviously the author's first book. He does not expand much on what this means, except to say that reviewers have called Ahmed's prose "accessible." However, the blogger does not think that this is a bad thing.   Instead, it shows that Ahmed is a confident writer. Landon writes, "He does not rely on verbosity to communicate his setting or his character's affectations, rather he

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uses their unique voices, providing ample beauty in construction of the whole, not the parts that constitute it." In other words, the simplicity of the author's language allows all of the literary elements to really speak for themselves (Landon "Crescent Moon" par. 4). The blogger's comments speak to the overall construction of the novel. It is obviously more than a cookie-cutter novel.

Landon goes on to examine a major theme in the novel. He writes that Adoulla and Raseed constantly get into arguments with each other. The former is older so he defends the Crescent Moon Kingdom's customs; the latter, on the other hand, is young and looks to the future. Landon speculates that this give and take is meant to reflect the current struggle within Islam between fundamentalist and progressive sects. The blogger also writes that this theme is also symbolized by the character Zamia. She does not get into arguments like Adoulla and Raseed. Instead, readers get to see how she adjusts to the culture of Dhamsawaat, a nearby city. Zamia is from a small village and unaccustomed to their ways. (Landon "Crescent Moon" par. 5). This theme especially shows the literary potential of the genre. It is more than escape; the genre can also be used to comment on current day issues.

Interestingly, the blogger only briefly addresses the author's world building, what is often considered to be the defining characteristic of fantasy. By spending such a small amount of time describing *Throne of the Crescent Moon,* though, Landon signals that it is not a stereotypical fantasy. He writes that Ahmed "paints a world that would sit nicely in the Fertile Crescent." It is infused into every aspect of the story, from the author's descriptions of markets, to characters' interactions with each other, to religious rites. In addition, while the setting is

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reminiscent of the Middle East, the blogger writes that it is also distinctly Ahmed's (Landon "Crescent Moon" par. 6). The blogger does not go into much more detail about what this means. The setting is clearly very unique, though, even for a fantasy novel.

Landon concludes by writing, "In case it hasn't been clear thus far, I loved this novel" ("Crescent Moon" par. 10). It was nominated for Nebula and Hugo awards, two of the highest honors within the fantasy and science fiction communities (Landon "Crescent Moon" par. 4). The blogger asserts that it is truly deserving of this recognition. In the process, he shows that fantasy should not be reduced to a handful of tropes.

Another significant review looks at *Generation V* by M.L. Brennan.   The book is about Fortitude Scott, "a vampire without any of the perks" (Meadows par. 1). His life is spiraling out of control at the start of the novel--he recently found out his girlfriend cheated on him. Fort is also in the beginning stages of becoming a vampire. This means that he lacks magical abilities and only sometimes drinks blood. He is not excited about completing his transition, though. Fort knows that he will lose all empathy for humans like his sister Prudence who murdered their childhood foster family. However, Fortitude cannot escape supernatural politics. He learns about a girl who was kidnapped by a vampire clan. Fort teams up with a shapeshifter named Suzume to save her (Meadows par. 3).

Dribble of Ink blogger Foz Meadows begins by examining the book's setting. However, she starts with an aspect of the world that is not immediately obvious--the folklore that governs how vampires operate. In this novel, vampires are not made through the typical method of a bite to the neck. Instead, they create "Renfields," a slow process that involves replacing the blood of

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humans with vampire blood. Renfields then acts as surrogates, giving birth to a half-human, half-vampire children. While this might seem like an insignificant detail, it goes a long way in helping to establish the setting, according to Meadows. It explains why vampires do not completely take over the world (Meadows par. 5). As a result, Brennan's setting stands out as "original and clever" (Meadows par. 8). The author finds a unique angle to explore a topic that has been written about so many times before.

The blogger does not simply stop after analyzing the author's world building, though. She also goes in depth examining how the characters are portrayed. They clearly reject the idea that fantasy lacks depth. The blogger writes that Fort and Suzume seem real even though their world is supernatural. In addition, the narration is "wry" which helps to develop Fort as a character (Meadows par. 9). Suzume's development is even more complicated. At first, she seems like she is going to fall into the stereotypical "manic pixie dream girl" role. For example, Meadows points out that she manipulates men into buying her things. However, she explains that the author never condones Suzume's actions. Instead, Brennan uses them to establish that the shape-shifter is a trickster (Meadows par. 10).

Meadow's analysis of secondary characters is much more critical, though. She writes, "The women are sexually manipulative, jealous and greedy, while the men are arrogant, domineering and sexist." Despite this, the blogger likes that they are diverse. She states, "it's clear that Brennan is an author who thinks about issues of representation." Even though Meadow's analysis is mixed, it still serves an important purpose. The blogger demonstrates that even minor characters can be developed in interesting ways, just like the protagonists. The

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author might not always get it right, but she still tried (Meadows par. 11). This sends the message—so should other fantasy authors.

In addition, the blogger looks at how the author explores the theme of gender.   Namely, Fortitude is the only one who cares about the kidnapped girl's fate. What might seem like a strong suit, though, is actually the weakest part of the book for the blogger. Meadows criticizes the author for relying on the "damsel in distress" trope.   It robs the character of agency and implies that being young and attractive makes a female character more important.   Not to mention, the blogger writes that the damsel in distress trope it is not very creative. She suggests that if the author is going to incorporate it into the story, she should give it a new spin. Despite her misgivings, Meadows concludes that this element makes sense in the story (Meadows par. 7). It shows just how sinister the vampire clan can be. Meadow's commentary also demonstrates the complexity of urban fiction. The novels can be used to examine complicated ideas.

Although the review is not entirely favorable, it rejects the idea that urban fantasy is one dimensional. The blogger concludes by stating that even though it has flaws, "G*eneration V* is a well-written, originally world-built and solidly characterized first instalment in a series" (par. 12).   Not only does it flesh out a variety of elements, it can also be used to explore other themes like the treatment of women within fantasy, something that is not always possible in mainstream reviews.

Finally, a detailed review of another urban fantasy novel looks at *Wolf in Shadow* by John Lambshead. It is about Rhian Jones, a young shapeshifter from the Welsh countryside who moves to London. There she becomes enthralled in the supernatural world. She moves in with a

witch named Frannie and gains the affection of an elf (Weimer par. 5). The novel also looks at

Karla and Jameson, government agents who specialize in supernatural affairs.

Blogger Paul Weimer begins by examining the novel's setting. Like many descriptions

of fantasy, this appears to be the novel's strongest aspect. According to the blogger, it offers an

"Interesting take on the otherworld" (Weimer par. 4). He explains that Lambshead does a good

job of showing modern day London and its seedy supernatural counterpart. In addition, the

author offers glimpses into past worlds. Weimer writes, "'Distorted, often very distorted and

twisted versions off London's past are just a gate away." Not only that, the author portrays them

convincingly. For example, Weimer writes that Lambshead paints London during Roman times

in great detail (Weimer par. 8).

However, the novel is much more than the setting. What distinguishes *Wolf in Shadow*

from other fantasy works, according to the blogger, is its social commentary. Lambshead uses

humor to critique present-day issues. It pokes fun at everything, from gamers to politics.

However, the author did so in a way that was not heavy handed. The blogger states, "it seems

obligatory for novels from this publisher to always have some socio-political commentary of one

stripe or another enfolded into the narrative." Weimer writes that it is subtle in this novel,

though. In fact, he compares the author's use of wit to that of Charles Stross, a fantasy giant

(Weimer par. 11). This is significant because again it demonstrates that fantasy is more than

dragons, witches, and fairies; instead, it is multi-layered.

Next, Weimer comments on the novel's characterization. His analysis of its development

is much more critical. Sometimes the characters appear to comply with stereotypes about the

genre. Namely, the blogger writes that some were underdeveloped, specifically Rhian and James. This is clear when the blogger writes, "there are frustrating gaps and things left unexplained." However, this is Weimer's only quibble with the book. The blogger goes on to write that together Rhian, Klara, and Frankie are especially captivating. He asserts that they create "a stew of interesting people to bounce off each other, the furniture of the novel, and the antagonists." Weimer does not into much detail about what this means exactly. However, the trio is clearly not a bunch of stock characters (Weimer par. 10).

Interestingly, the blogger also takes time to revel in the lowbrow. At one point, Weimer compares the novel's multiple settings to those found in one of his favorite roleplaying games, World of Darkness (Weimer par. 8). This connection helps readers to really visualize their level of detail. However, it also hints that the novel has mass appeal much like the game. This does not keep the blogger from giving it four out of five stars, though. Weimer concludes, "It's a promising start to what could be yet another fantasy series set in London, but with a distinct voice and niche of his own" (Weimer par. 4). Not only is it well written, but it also stretches the boundaries of urban fantasy, offering a more light-hearted take on a subgenre that is often considered to be dark.

Other reviews of fantasy were much more brief. However, they still hinted at a complexity that is often thought to be missing from genre fiction. This can be seen looking at an Upcoming4.me review of *The Exiled Blade* by Jon Grimwood. It is "an innovative take on 15th century Venetian politics and history" that also includes supernatural creatures. The book focuses on Lady Giulietta who is kidnapped by Prince Alonzo. Her boyfriend, Lord Tycho, is an

assassin. However, he cannot rescue her when a blizzard hits the city ("REVIEW: Jon Grimwood" par. 2).

The blogger states in quick succession that "Grimwood writes lush and literary books whatever the genre, and throughout the whole series he made life in 15th century Venice feel fantastically real. Paired with excellent and exciting story, the entire Assissini trilogy turned out to be amazingly accomplished piece of work." The blogger does not go into too much depth about each literary element. However, it is clear that the book does not simply adhere to a few stereotypes about fantasy fiction ("REVIEW: Jon Grimwood" par. 3).

Mystery

Mystery was another popular genre among bloggers in the sample. A mystery is defined as "any book in which some type of crime has been committed and someone attempts to solve the foresaid mystery, that is, discover who, how, and or why the crime was committed" (Charles et al 1*).* The emergence of the genre coincided neatly with the paperback revolution. It is generally agreed that mystery did not develop until the industrial revolution. In the late nineteenth century, more and more people moved into cities, leading to an increasing divide between the rich and poor. With the creation of such a wealth gap, there was also a spike in crime (Scaggs 18). However, people did not trust the police because of corruption in early departments (Martin 9). Around this time, Edgar Allan Poe published "The Murders of the Rue Morgue." It reflected many people's anxiety at the time, according to crime scholar John Scaggs. The story is about a detective investigating a mysterious murder. He is so astute that he

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does not need the help of a police department. Poe's story as a result is widely considered to have launched the detective fiction (Scaggs 19).

Most mystery at the time, though, took the form of penny dreadfuls, cheap newspapers with fictionalized accounts of real crimes. They were the "British equivalent of the story paper" (Hoppenstand xv). Unlike Poe, penny dreadfuls did not feature detectives, focusing instead on gory details to hook readers. Penny dreadfuls quickly gained a negative reputation as a result. Journalist James Greenword once called them "'contagious trash'" and "'impure literature'" (qtd in Bradford 11). However, they were eventually replaced by sensation novels. "They were a respectable alternative to the penny-dreadfuls," as crime scholar Richard Bradford asserts (11). Sensation novels usually featured characters of a high social class investigating family secrets. Notably, they initially did not feature detectives. Bradford asserts that authors wanted to send a message about class-the wealthy were so refined that they did not need help to resolve their issues. However, this changed in 1868 with the publication of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone,* the first sensation novel to feature a detective. The novel focuses on an aristocratic young woman named Rachel Verrinder whose diamond jewelry is stolen. She calls on Sergeant Cliff to solve the crime (Bradford 12)

While Poe launched the mystery genre, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made it famous (Bradford 17). He started publishing *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* just a couple decades after the inception of sensation novels. It was first published in installments in *The Strand* magazine (Bradford 14).   His protagonist Sherlock Holmes exemplified the analytical skills which the police at the time supposedly lacked. He was so intelligent that he could single

handedly solve crimes. This set the template for a generation of mystery novels to come: the detective always had superior insight (Thomson 144). Doyle's novels were geared to a higher class of reader, according to Bradford. He omitted the gory details usually found in story papers. Bradford states that "they could be appreciated by the family patriarch but were thought suitable also for his wife and children" (Bradford 16). In addition, Holmes was obviously of a higher social status. Bradford writes that he was refined and knowledgeable about "literature, philosophy, astronomy, politics, botany, and geology" (Bradford 14). Both of these factors helped to give the mystery genre some legitimacy (Bradford 16).

In the early twentieth century, though, crime fiction took a very different shape in the United States. Like fantasy and romance, the genre only gained notoriety with pulp magazines (Charles et al 11). For example, *the Black Mask*, launched in 1920, was especially popular. Frequent contributors included Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler (Scaggs 29). The now-famous authors helped to launch what is known as the "hard-boiled detective." This type of novel was a reaction to earlier detective fiction, according to crime scholar Sean McCann. Detectives like Sherlock Holmes were usually well to-do. In addition, plots were "usually built around the detective's effort to solve the puzzle of the murderer's elaborate schemes." However, authors like Hammett and Chandler did not think that this was very realistic (McCann 43). They described crimes in more detail (McCann 44).   In addition, their detectives were tough loner types. As a result, hard-boiled detective novels were also excluded from literary canon formation. Their violent storylines aroused the concern of critics (Charles et al 7).

While mystery was frowned upon in the United States, it flourished in Britain. *The Reader's Advisory Guide to Mystery* writes that "the 1920s ushered in the Golden Age of detective fiction" (Charles et al 6). Agatha Christie was largely responsible for its increase in popularity. Her Miss Marple novels established the "cozy" as a separate category of mystery. Instead of focusing on gory details, the books explore the mystery solving process. Crime scholar David Grossvogel writes that for the protagonist, "the game was merely a puzzle (or a series of interlocking puzzles) told in the form of a story." Readers could attempt to solve the crime along with the main character. In addition, Christie's heroines were much more developed than others until that time. Readers were given more insight into their thoughts. The biggest difference, though, between cozies and other mysteries is their gentle tone. The plots are usually less violent and the setting is somewhere in the countryside (Grossvogel 4). All of these elements helped with the genre's reputation.

Another type of crime grew popular around this time—the thriller. While detective fiction investigates a crime that happened in the past, thrillers take place in the present. There are a couple of types. However, neither has much cultural cache. The noir thriller focuses on the criminal. According to crime scholar John Priestman, "we identify with protagonists who consciously exceed the law" (34). Noir thrillers started in the 1830s with the Newgate novel, a story paper which featured graphic descriptions of violence (Bradford 6). From the very beginning, they were the subject to condemnation. Critics believed that the books would serve as how-to manuals for would-be criminals (Bradford 6). The other type is the hero thriller "where the protagonists confront a powerful conspiracy of wrongdoers without the guaranteed

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support of the forces of law and order" (Priestman 33). It emerged a little later than the noir

thriller, primarily in the form of spy fiction (Priestman 44-46). Their tone changed somewhat in

the 1970s as authors starting featuring more action (Bradford 105). According to scholars, the

subgenre reflects society's growing anxiety about war (Priestman 46). However, their focus on

drama did little to help the idea that mystery only offers escape.

Mystery has seen more acceptance in recent years. *The Readers Advisory Guide to*

Mystery writes, "The 1990s proved the new Golden Age of mystery fiction as a genre" (Charles

et al 8). Many people realized that detective novels did not reflect the reality of solving crimes.

As crime author James Ellroy once said, "'The last time a Private Eye investigated a homicide

was never'" (qtd. in Messent 41). This led to the creation of the police procedural. In many

ways, they are similar to traditional detective novels which focus on a star officer. A well-

known example of police procedurals is Patricia Cornwell's novels about forensic scientist Kay

Scarpetta (Messent 43). The main theme that differentiates them from other novels, though, is

that they take a broader look at the justice system (Messent 43). Namely, police procedurals

show the day-to-day operations of law enforcement organizations (Messent 41). However, they

are still regarded with suspicion. Even scholars like Stefano Tani state that mystery is "'a

reassuringly "low" genre which is supposed to please the expectations of the reader'" (Bradford

117).

Descriptions of how to review mystery vary, sometimes even within the same source.

For example, author H.R.F. Keating outlines how to develop characters in *Writing Crime*

Fiction. He shows that detectives can display some range (Keating 3). This is clear when

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Keating reminds aspiring writers that they do not have to write about professional sleuths (6). In fact, there are advantages to making the main character an amateur. Keating writes that he or she does not have to know much about legal practices (Keating 6). However, at the same time the author makes it seem as if investigators cannot display too much variety. In fact, according to the author's description, this will never be possible. Keating writes that no detective can be as perfect as Sherlock Holmes. Aspiring writers can only hope to write about "lesser detectives." He or she "must still be some sort of a hero" (Keating 7). In other words, the detective has to be able to solve the crime. On the other hand, the protagonist must be somewhat flawed or readers will not be able to relate (Keating 7). This limits how mystery authors can develop characters.

Most descriptions of mystery, though, focus on plot. As author S.S. Van Dine writes, "A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no 'atmospheric' preoccupations" (Van Dine 191). In other words, elaborate writing and character development only take away from a novel's action. However, Van Dine's instructions for outlining mysteries also appear limited in scope. In his essay "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," the author state that plots usually revolve around a murder (Van Dine 190). The culprit must not be obvious. Van Dine suggests staying away from making the murderer a professional criminal or the main character's servant. However, all clues have to be clearly laid out, according to the author. There cannot be any unexpected twists because readers want to participate in the problem-solving process. This is the primary reason why people read mysteries (Van Dine 189). While this might be true, Van

Dine's assertion only makes the genre seem one-dimensional. Plots cannot be too complex if readers hope to follow along.

Mystery author R. Austin Freeman reiterates the idea that plot is the most important literary element in "The Art of the Detective Story." He asserts that good detective fiction is scarce because too many authors focus on the "highly sensational." They care more about describing the gory details of a crime than story (Freeman 9). Freeman description of mystery plots, though, do not appear much more nuanced. He writes that the construction of stories usually take place in four stages (Freeman 14). First, he states that there is "the statement of the problem." The mystery can take a variety of forms but it usually focuses on some kind of murder because it is more dramatic (Freeman 14). Next is the "production of the data" phase when the author establishes a series of clues (Freeman 14). Like Van Dine, the author writes that mysteries cannot take unexpected twists. This was common among older mysteries. The author states, "In stories of the older type, the middle action is filled out with a succession of false clues…the clues are patiently followed, one after another, and found to lead nowhere." However, Freeman writes that this is unfair to readers (Freeman 15). Third, Freeman writes that the "discovery" phase is when the detective announces who the culprit is (Freeman 15). Finally, the detective explains the evidence that he or she has spent the novel collecting. This is Freeman's "proof" phase (Freeman 16). Despite the author initial claim that the mystery is "highly technical work," he still reduces plots to a series of steps. This also makes the genre appear less complex.

Mystery bloggers, though, asserts that mystery is more than simple pleasure and a regimented plot. Most in the sample spent their time analyzing vintage titles. An *Existential Ennui* review of *The Big Bounce* by Elmore Leonard is a prime example. A classic hero thriller, the book follows a man named Jack Ryan who takes a job working at a lakeside resort. He can only get odd jobs because of his criminal background. Ryan eventually becomes involved with a woman named Nancy, also known for her troubled past. She enlists him to help steal a large sum of money from her boyfriend, a local landowner.

Right away, it is clear that the book defies stereotypical definitions of mystery. The author develops several literary elements, no just plot, one of the primary stereotypes about the genre. In fact, blogger Nick Jones hints that it might be underdeveloped. He states that "The plot isn't terribly complicated." However, he continues by stating that "Elmore Leonard plots rarely are" (Jones par. 3). In other words, this is not necessarily a shortcoming; it just is not the author's area of interest.

The blogger has much more to say about how Leonard develops characters, again challenging many people's conception of mystery. Nick states that they are the driving force behind the novel (Jones par. 4). Ryan demonstrates a lot of complexity. He has a temper but is also thoughtful (Jones par. 5). However, Nick had trouble liking Nancy, calling her "bored" and "feckless." While Sharps does not entirely believe her as a character, his analysis is still significant. It shows that readers still expect characters in the genre to be well developed.

Finally, Jones states that Leonard has an eye for detail. The blogger writes: "...a certain look shot across a bar booth; the cocked head and corner-of-an-eye glance when combing one's

hair in the mirror; the idle daydreams of a bored female holidaymaker, fantasizing about Ryan sweeping her off her feet" (Jones par. 5). Not only does this speak to his writing style, but it also helps to develop the setting. Readers get to really see the world that Ryan inhabits. World building does not often receive attention within mystery. Sharps, though, demonstrates that this is not the case.

Another good example of a mystery review is by the Rapsheet. It looks at *Life's Work* by Jonathan Valine. It is about a detective, Harry Stone, who is hired to hunt down a missing football player for the Cincinnati Cougars, Billy Parks. First, though, he locates Otto Bluerock, the player's best friend (Pierce par. 8). Together they scour gyms and bars in search of the famed player (Pierce par. 9).

The blogger begins by explaining his process for selecting the novel. He writes that he is trying to find "forgotten books" to highlight. He also states that the author is the winner of Edgar and Anthony Awards which are dedicated to mystery authors (Pierce par. 1). This is significant because it shows that Valin has a certain amount of prestige within the genre. As a result, he deserves to be remembered.

Despite this, the novel appears to adhere to some stereotypes about mystery fiction. The detective is "a middle-aged knight in damaged armor…a guy who's been around the block" (Pierce par. 2). In other words, he is the typical hard-boiled detective. Similarly, Bluerock is a tough loner. The blogger writes, "So what if he beats up a woman or two? If Bill can't keep all that meanness trapped in between the white lines during game time, well, who could?" (Pierce

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par. 8). He does not condone Bluerock's actions. However, this is the attitude of the novel-

mystery characters, especially men, are expected to be cold and aloof.

A couple of characteristics, though, set this novel apart from people's expectations. First,

the blogger compares the author's writing to other famous authors within the genre such as

Raymond Chandler. He states that the two share a similar narration style. To support this

point, the blogger quotes a passage that resonated with him in particular. It states, "I didn't

find Bluerock inside--just a desk and a chair and a little piece of sunlight that had fallen

through an open window and flattened itself on the concrete floor" (Pierce par. 7). The

blogger writes that this is the author at his best, spare and descriptive at the same time. By

comparing the author to Chandler, the blogger also shows this is not a stereotypical genre

novel.

In addition, the book can be read as a commentary on sports. The blogger writes that it

brings up "the kind of ethical questions rear their ugly heads every time a new Lance

Armstrong scandal breaks loose." For example, it explored the topic of steroid use before it

became a hot button issue (Pierce par. 9). In addition, the author asks what happens to athletes

after they have been used by the system. This is where the novel gets its title. Bluerock

repeats, "Time to get on with my life's work" (Pierce par. 10). He clearly does not have much

work left to do, though, a victim of the sports industry. Such complicated examinations of

real-world issues are not expected from mystery novels.

The blogger concludes by admitting that the book has issues. There is too much dialogue

and the book takes itself too seriously. The blogger even comments on the treatment of women

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in the book. He writes that "most of the women in the pages tend toward victimhood" (Pierce par. 12). However, the blogger writes that he enjoyed the book. Not only that, he missed the main character. The blogger writes, "I enjoyed reading him again" (Pierce par. 13). This declaration of enjoyment is a lowbrow characteristic. However, the novel is clearly more well-rounded than most descriptions of the genre.

Another interesting mystery review looks at *The Scent of Death* by Andrew Taylor. Blogger Martin Edwards gives it an enthusiastic recommendation. Right away, the blogger hints at the novel's lowbrow value. He writes, 'I think it's fair to say that the appearance of a new Andrew Taylor novel has become an Event, rather in the way that the arrival of a new book by that exceptionally entertaining writer Reginald Hill used to be an Event" (Edwards par. 1). In other words, it promotes enjoyment. However, it also possesses literary worth

Edwards writes that the book is set in New York in the late 1700s. The protagonist is a government clerk named Edward Savill (Edwards par. 2). He stays with the Wintour family while conducting business. During his stay, another guest of the Wintours is murdered. A man is convicted of the crime and hanged. However, Savill suspects the real murderer is still on the loose. He investigates the crime against the backdrop of political unrest (Edwards par. 3).

The blogger writes that the plot appears to be the strongest part. Namely he writes that it is well-paced. The blogger explains, "A series of small incidents keep the plot moving along while the characters and their environment are developed with unobtrusive skill" (Edwards par. 2). This does little to set the novel apart from others within the genre. Most are expected to

have compelling storylines.   Readers, though, can see that the author develops his with exceptional skill.

In addition, the author develops the characters in intimate detail. The blogger does not directly comment on this aspect of the novel but it is clear in his description. Taylor shows Savill as he struggles with his marriage, according to the blogger. Mystery readers do not usually get to see the protagonists living real lives, or so it is believed (Edwards par. 3). Edwards, however, shows that the novel pushes genre boundaries.

Not only is the book well-written, but also informative, another lowbrow characteristic. The blogger continues that Taylor "achieves the distinction of imparting a great deal of information without making his research obvious." This adds realism to the revolutionary war setting (Edwards par. 5). According to Nye, the lowbrow crave instruction. Even so, the book is clearly more than lowbrow. It is too well rounded to be dismissed simply as trash.

While bloggers concentrated on vintage mystery titles, they also review newer works. One example is a Book Riot post looking at *The Art Forger* by Barbara Shapiro. Even though the review is short, it does a good job of conveying the book's quality. The novel, a fictionalized account of a real-life mystery, is based on the theft of thirteen paintings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The novel focuses on Claire Roth who by trade reproduces great works of art. She is commissioned by the robber to forge a painting by Edgar Degas.

Blogger Rachel Manwill almost seems surprised by how well-developed the novel is. She writes, "even though the book is solidly a mystery, there's plenty of literary handholds to

grab onto as well." The plot has plenty of surprises and the characters are well-rounded, according to the blogger. It clearly rejects the idea that mystery cannot be complex.

However, the novel still offers a sense of escape, one of the hallmarks of lowbrow fiction. Manwill also explains that the book was just plainly enjoyable, stating, "Can I tell you anything at all about how one piece connects to another? Not hardly. But did I enjoy the hell out of The Art Forger? Damn right, I did" (par. 1). This combination of the literary and fun leads the blogger to highly recommend the novel.

Another blogger, Upcoming4.me, reviews *The Cambodian Book of the Dead* by Tom Vater. The post is short as well but gives a good sense of the novel's complexity. It is about a private eye named Maier who takes a case requiring him to visit Phnom Penh. His work is quickly interrupted, though, by his ex-girlfriend Carisse, a general in Pol Pot's army, and a former Nazi called the White Spider ("Review: Tom Vater" par. 2).

While their story provides the underlying structure to the novel, it pays equal attention to the history and customs of Cambodia. According to the reviewer, this focus on setting distinguishes the book from other mysteries. The unnamed blogger writes, "All this will certainly leave some people quite confused and perhaps even disappointed." However, the reviewer urges readers to stick with the novel because it also has an exciting plot ("Review: Tom Vater" par. 3).

The blogger concludes by commenting on how much he enjoyed the private eye. The reviewer writes, "I hope this is just the first book involving Detective Maier and I'm already looking forward to our next encounter" ("Review: Tom Vater" par. 4). Again, the novel clearly

offers a sense of enjoyment which is typically associated with lowbrow. As the blogger

demonstrates, though, it is much more complex than many people think.

Science Fiction

Another genre that bloggers sometimes review is science fiction. It is difficult to define

because the category is so broad in scope. In addition, much of science fiction is concerned with

how technology is used. As a result, it is constantly evolving. However, librarian Joyce Saricks

offers a flexible but comprehensive definition in *The Reader's Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*.

She writes that it "posits worlds and technologies which could exist." This can be interpreted in

a variety of ways. For some, it conjures images of artificial intelligence while others envision

travelling to faraway planets (Saricks 245). One thing is clear, though—science fiction has

always lacked value, viewed as a mass phenomenon. Science fiction scholar Brian Baker writes

that it is "regarded as an ephemeral popular form, of little cultural value, relegated to...the

cultural and social margins designated by such words as 'pulp' or 'trash'" (1).

This view of science fiction is in large part due to its beginnings. The history of the

genre is not as long as many others. Some scholars like Mendlesohn write that Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein was a precursor to modern day science fiction. Her monster tale supposedly

expressed many people's growing concerns about technology during the time (Levy 233).

Writers like Jules Verne also helped to establish the genre, publishing *Journey to the Center of

the Earth* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in the 1860s and 1870s (Roberts 59-60).

While the novels do not resemble much science fiction today, they embody the speculative

nature of the genre by envisioning potential worlds. However, most critics agree that the genre

really emerged in the late 1800s with the publication of dime novels (Lerner "Modern Science Fiction" 7). According to Roberts, during this time "we start to see the actual growth of SF as a meaningful category in its own right, which is to say, as something more than an occasional single novel" (Roberts 59).

Science fiction quickly made the transition into pulp magazines. As literary scholar Edward James states, "'the American pulps may have bequeathed a largely unfortunate heritage to SF'" (Roberts 69). Its storylines were more fast-paced and poorly written compared to other literature at the time (Roberts 67-8) *Thrill Book* launched in 1919 was the first to focus on science fiction. However, *Amazing Stories* was the first to experience any kind of success. Launched in 1926, creator Hugo Gernsbeck helped to establish the field by focusing on works which delved into the specifics of scientific concepts (Roberts 67-8). The magazine published authors who are well known now such as Edgar Rice Burroughs. He is best known for publishing Tarzan; however, he also wrote the Carter series about a man who travels to Mars where he marries an alien princess (Roberts 70). These stories and others within the genre were "kinetic, fast paced, and exciting" (Roberts 68). As a result, it was written off as lowbrow (Roberts 70-5).

However, the popularity of science fiction dime novels started to plummet in the 1940s. The genre lost writers who went to fight in World War II. Thus, publishers "concentrated their scarce resources on the most profitable of their magazines, a category that did not generally include science fiction." This caused the numbers of science fiction pulps to shrink dramatically (Lerner Modern Science Fiction 24). However, some more mainstream publishers realized their

marketing potential and began to release them in paperback form. Even then, though, science fiction novels were viewed as having less value than other works of fiction. This was largely due to the fact that the books were geared toward kids and teens (Lerner *Science Fiction* 32). For example, author Robert Heinlein is now widely regarded as one of the science fiction greats. At the time, though, he was marketed to young readers (Lerner *Science Fiction* 31).

Technology was an ever increasing concern, though, with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, sparking interest in the genre again. As science fiction scholar Frederick Lerner writes, "To many editors of popular magazines, science fiction writers seemed well-equipped to explore this new world" (*Science Fiction* 35). As a result, there was another boom in publishing science fiction. Even then, though, it was mostly viewed as a money-maker, not as serious literature. This is clear looking at the different techniques which publishers utilized to market such titles (Lerner *Science Fiction* 34). Publishers of dime novels did not care so much about drawing in new readers The houses used traditional methods of advertising the burgeoning genre (Lerner *Science Fiction* 34). The genre, though, was still reluctantly accepted by literary critics. Lerner states that "Other journals such as Kirkus lumped reviews of SF with those of other genres under condescending titles, such as 'Of Time and Space' or 'Spacemen's Realm'" (Lerner *Science Fiction* 34). Some coverage was better than none, but the message was still clear. Science fiction was not worthy of having its own reviews (Lerner *Science Fiction* 34).

Science fiction only started to gain legitimacy in the 1960s with the creation of New Wave as a distinct category. It was defined in opposition to earlier pulp magazines works, according to science fiction scholar Adam Roberts (80). One of the first to champion this new

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form was Michael Moorcock, editor of the science fiction magazine *New Worlds*. He wrote

several manifestos describing his vision for the future of science fiction (Levy 226). Like many

authors at the time, he started to believe that the tropes of robots and aliens were overplayed. He

stated, "Briefly, these are some of the qualities I miss on the whole – passion, subtlety, irony,

original characterization, original and good style, a sense of involvement in human affairs,

colour, density, depth, and, on the whole, real feeling from the writer" (qtd in Landon *Science*

Fiction 151). To counteract this, Moorcock believed that authors should concentrate more on

traditional literary elements than on science. As a result, the mid-twentieth century is considered

to be science fiction's golden age. Well known New Wave authors include Robert Heinlein

(*Stranger in a Strange Land)* and Frank Herbert (*Dune)* (Roberts 80-1).

Shortly afterward, there was a boom in scholarship on the genre. Science fiction

enthusiasts had always published their own criticism. However, it was always within genre

specific magazines so it did not reach a wide audience (Wolfe *Critical* xii). In the 1970s, though,

science fiction scholarship started appearing in academic journals (Wolfe *Critical* xxx). Scholar

Gary Wolfe speculates about this sudden interest in the genre. He writes that "it has often been

suggested that this book in SF scholarship was essentially opportunistic, a result of college

English departments cynically trying to attract students by finally permitting a once despised

genre to enter the curriculum" (Wolfe "History" 486) However, Wolfe believes that the genre

had simply reached a point of maturity as more authors were accepted by the mainstream (Wolfe

"History" 487). Initial scholarship on the genre included *Billion Year Spree: The True History of*

Science Fiction by Brian Aldiss, the *Survey of Science Fiction Literature* by Frank Magill, and *SF: The Other side of Realism* by Thomas Clareson (Wolf "History" 486).

Science fiction has seen the development of various subgenres in recent years. For example, it took a drastically different turn in the 1980s with the emergence of cyberpunk. The term was coined in 1983 by writer Bruce Bethke. It includes "stories about the information explosion of the 1980s (hence 'Cyber', from cybernetics), most of them picturing a dense, urban, confusing new world in which most of us will find that we have been disenfranchised from any real power (hence 'punk')" (James and Mendlesohn 67). However, author William Gibson popularized the subgenre with the publication of *Neuromancer* about two computer hackers (Levy 232). Such complex storylines gave the genre more value because they required a certain amount of technical knowledge in order to be understood. As a result, it could not be dismissed as frivolous (Levy 233). However, there is still the belief that science fiction is anathema to literary value. Brian Baker, author of *Science Fiction,* gives the example of Margaret Atwood whose novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is widely regarded as a classic. It is viewed as somehow transcending the genre, despite including science fiction elements. Everything else is viewed as a mass phenomenon (Baker 84).

Interestingly, many scholars describe the genre more favorably than others. Perhaps because of its association with science, it is considered by some to be intellectual. This can be seen in Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*. He gives novice writers advice on how to get started within the genre. The author begins by outlining how to develop a setting (Card 57). This is clearly the focus of the genre, according to the famed science fiction

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author. He writes that a world must have its own rules for operating (Card 35). For example, aspiring writers have to establish the limitations of space travel, even if it does not play an important role in the book. It will inform other elements like how characters behave. For example, if space travel is difficult, characters will be less excited to do it. World building also means coming up with a history for the setting. Card writes, "Worlds don't spring up out of nothing" (Card 49). If authors do not establish a history, then everything seems random (Card 57).

Descriptions of characterization within science fiction are mixed. For example, Card offers a complex interpretation of its development. He writes that main characters can be likable. However, he also explains that protagonists do not always have to be nice. In fact, Card writes that sometimes the main character is "a slime ball" (Card 65). This bucks the notion that protagonists must be easily relatable, an often-held belief. Other scholars of the genre, though, offer less nuanced descriptions of character development. For example, Scott Sanders states outright that the characters are supposed to be less developed. Authors do not develop them because it mimics the erasure of identity which people experience in future worlds. He writes, "In its treatment of character science fiction reproduces the experience of living in a regimented, conformist society" (Sanders 131). While this is an interesting interpretation, it still sends the message that character development is less important to the genre than other elements.

Card's description of plot is somewhat nuanced.   He writes that there are only three kinds of stories within science fiction. Event stories are when something is wrong with the world but order is eventually restored (Card 81). Idea plots raise a question and answer it by the

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end. Card gives examples of a few questions popular in science fiction, including, "Why did this beautiful ancient civilization on a faraway planet come to an end?" and "Who buried this monolith on the moon?" (Card 77). Finally, Card states that character stories focus on "the transformation of a character's role in the communities that matter most to him" (Card 79). The author's categories are broad enough to encompass a variety of storylines. By reducing science fiction to a few plots, though, Card gives the impression that it easy to categorize. Science fiction writer Carl Malmgren, author of *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*, takes a different approach to describing how science fiction stories are structured.   He writes that they typically deal with one of four themes: aliens, alternate societies, technology, and alternate worlds (Malmgren 52). He goes on to explain that authors usually extrapolate about these ideas to one degree or another. However, Malmgren also reaffirms the idea that the genre is limited in scope. These types of books cannot deviate from certain ideas if they want to be considered successful.

Book bloggers roundly challenge the idea that science fiction is less developed.   Their reviews paint a nuanced understanding of the genre, demonstrating that it offers enjoyment and is complex at the same time. Some bloggers in the sample look at titles which explore space travel. A good example is a SF Signal review of *On a Red Station Drifting* by Aliette de Bodard. Protagonist Le Thi Linh is an intergalactic politician forced to flee her warring planet. She finds refuge on her cousin's space station. However, this also has risks. The station is falling apart and Linh's arrival reawakens old family drama (Weimer par. 4).

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Blogger Paul Weimer does an excellent job of explaining how the author adds to the genre. For example, most reviewers expect science fiction novels to have well-developed worlds. However, the setting in this novel stands out as especially unique. The blogger states that he has read science fiction novels which take place in a variety of cultures, from Byzantium to the present-day United States. *On a Red Station Drifting*, however, is based on Vietnam. "*That* is absolutely new to me," Weimer writes. He goes on to explain that this is more than just a gimmick. The culture is infused into every aspect of the story, giving it an air of authenticity (Weimer par. 6).

The blogger continues by writing that the author's perspective on technology is also fresh. De Bodard does not go into too much detail about how it works exactly. According to Weimer, "this is not a novel for the tech-heads who want the intricacies of how space craft, stations and computer's work" (Weimer par. 5). However, it does a good job of combining the old with the new. The author offers a fresh interpretation of artificial intelligence while also paying homage to well-known science fiction authors (Weimer par. 6). This also helps to flesh out the setting even further.

Weimer continues by looking at the novel's characterization, stating that Linh and her cousin are well developed. The book is especially notable because it passes the Bechdel Test: "the action and power is firmly in the hands of the female characters." This is not always the case with science fiction, as the blogger asserts (Weimer par. 7). Again, though, Weimer points to the creativity of de Bodard's novel. She also defies stereotypes about how characters, especially women, should act within the genre.

Weimer's only criticism of the story is its "lack of whizz-bang conflict." However, he concludes that this is not necessarily a bad thing. It simply is not the focus of the story (Weimer par. 8). This does not challenge Card's assert that science fiction is limited to a few storylines. The review, though, shows that de Bodard takes her time developing a variety of literary elements. The novel is clearly complex and innovative, despite many critics' assertions about the genre.

Other science fiction reviews look at technology. One example is a Dribble of Ink review of *Love Minus Eighty* about farms where women are frozen so that they can be pimped out (Landon "Love" par. 1). The book weaves together the stories of three different characters. One is about a lesbian named Mira who is frozen in a heterosexual farm. Another is about a rich man, Rob, who accidentally kills a jogger with his car. He has her frozen in order to revive her later. The third story is about Veronika, a dating coach who does not have much of a love life. The three eventually come together to end the farms (Landon "Love" par. 2).

A Dribble of Ink blogger Justin Landon begins by attempting to define the function of science fiction. He asserts that it should utilize "the future to extrapolate about now" (Landon "Love" par. 7). The blogger goes on to state that McIntosh more than fulfills this expectation. The novel offers "a fascinating, and often disturbing, look at where things like Match.com, Facebook, eHarmony, and Tinder might take us." For example, the characters wear cameras so they can be observed at all times (Landon "Love" par. 3). This is a natural progression from where society stands now, according to Landon.

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Only then does the blogger examine the book's world building in-depth. Landon states that the author thoughtfully considers the concept of cryonics. The subject is "one of the oldest science fictional MacGuffins." It has been covered by a variety of authors, from Lovecraft to Heinlein. People rarely explore it in depth, though, according to the blogger. He writes that McIntosh does not go into much detail about the science behind cryonics, either. However, he offers one of the most believable depictions that he has ever seen. For example, Landon states that treatment would be impossibly expensive. Only the wealthy would be able to participate, like on the farms (Landon "Love" par. 4).

Finally, the blogger looks at the book's narrative arc and characterization. He applauds how the author weaves together three very different stories. Each character was still distinct and fascinating. Landon states, "He made me feel Rob's guilt, Veronika's effacing, and Mira's despair" (Landon "Love" par. 5). Such a task would be difficult for any author to navigate. For a science fiction author to do this speaks volumes about the genre. It is not one dimensional like many people think. In fact, it can juggle complex plots and characters.

A final example of an interesting science fiction book review looks at Charles Stross' *Neptune's Brood*. The anonymous blogger for Upcoming4.me writes that the novel takes place in the year 7,000 A.D. Earth can no longer support life so humans have been forced to populate the rest of the galaxy. The blogger admits to being reluctant to read the book. It was billed as the sequel to *Saturn's Children*, a title which the blogger did not enjoy. However, even though the book is set in the same world, it is not an extension of the first book. The blogger states that the

"novel itself is everything I expected *Saturn's Children* to be. Perhaps even a little bit more" ("REVIEW: CHARLES STROSS" par. 1).

The blogger spends most of the time writing about the fast-paced plot. Krina Alizond is investigating the disappearance of her sister, Ana. However, she is captured by pirates in the process. The bandits also happen to run an "FTL scam" hacking the universe's financial system ("REVIEW: CHARLES STROSS" par. 2). The blogger acknowledges that it is an unusual way to tie together two very different plots. However, this is the best part of the novel. It is developed in an unusual amount of details so readers can really imagine this far-off economy ("REVIEW: CHARLES STROSS" par. 3). More importantly, though, it puts a fresh spin on a common science fiction plot. Thus, it does not fit neatly into Card's list of standard storylines within the genre.

Young Adult Fiction

Young adult fiction or "YA" is one of the most popular types of novels among bloggers. More than half of the sample—eleven blogs—included some type of Young Adult review. YA literature is defined as "fiction written for, published for, or marketed to adolescents, roughly between the ages of 12 and 18" (Mendlesohn and James location 4460). As a result, it encompasses all genres. YA fiction is a relatively new invention compared to other types of novels; the concept of being a "young adult" simply did not exist until the twentieth century. Most teens until that time were treated like adults. As YA fiction scholar Michael Cart explains, "Who had the discursive leisure to grow up, to establish a culture of youth, to experience a young adulthood when there was so much adult work to be done?" (Cart 4). For this reason, teens were also expected to read the same books as adults. However, several events helped to

move the country toward a "culture of youth," according to YA literature scholar Michael Cart. During the early twentieth century, only a little over ten percent of people completed high school because they had to leave early to get jobs. As jobs dried up due to the Great Depression, though, more and more started attending. Scholar Grace Palladino states, "'The Great Depression pushed teenage youth out of the workplace and into the classroom.'" For this reason, almost half of teens graduated high school by the late 1930s (Cart 5)

Second, psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall helped to create a culture of youth in the United States. He published *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* in 1904. It acknowledged that teens have different developmental needs than adults (8). As a result, companies began marketing products such as books to this new segment of the population (Cart 5). This new focus by publishers manifested in a couple of ways. First, they began repackaging older titles to appeal to young readers. Publishers also started marketing new titles specifically as young adult fiction. The first YA novel is often considered to be *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly, published in 1943. The author did not intend for it to be a teen novel. However, it specifically addressed the concerns of young adults at the time. Namely, dating and courtship used to be highly regulated. As youth culture grew more popular, though, it became more commonplace for teens to go out by themselves. Daly incorporated this into her novel. *Seventeenth Summer* is about two teens who have a summer fling. In addition, Daly was just twenty-one herself when the book was published. Publishers thought that this would make the book more appealing to young readers. Daly's impact on the field of young adult fiction cannot be overestimated. She

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set the template regarding teen novels for decades to come. Many wrote about issues of

romance, hoping to capitalize on the author's success (Cart 14).

From the beginning, though, young adult fiction was subject to a lot of scrutiny. At first,

books for teens were relatively tame, including no mention of sex or other topics that could be

construed as controversial (Cart 17).   However, this started to change about a decade after the

publication of Daly's Seventeenth Summer. Critics accused teen novels of being too bland. For

example, literary scholar Frank Jennings once wrote, "'The stuff of adolescent literature, for the

most part, is mealy-mouthed, gutless, and pointless'" (qtd. in Cart 22). This led to the

publication of novels like S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders (*Car 25). Critics praised Hinton for

writing about a real-life issue (Cart 26). Cart states, "she wasn't writing about tree-shaded

streets in small-town middle America. Instead, she was writing about mean urban streets where

teenagers didn't have time to agonize over first love and dates for the prom" (Cart 25). In

addition, the author demonstrated that young adult literature did not have to be limited to girls.

She was the first author to write from boys' points of view (Cart 25).

However, young adult fiction came under fire a couple decades later for this same reason.

The 1970s are often called the "golden age" of teen fiction because this was when it boomed in

popularity. Robert Cormier, Judy Blue, M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, and Walter Dean Myers

emerged as YA authors during this time (Car 42). Like Hinton, they paid attention to serious

issues--sex, drugs, and physical and sexual abuse (Cart 30). New young adult novels were also

much more diverse, no longer focusing solely on the experiences of white, heterosexual teens.

Young adult novels also featured characters of color and gay characters (Cart 44-45). However,

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some critics thought that their novels were now too real. They worried that such brutally honest

storylines would inspire teens to experiment with sex and drugs. Young Adult literature had

moved too far in the other direction for many critics.

Young adult literature of the 1980s appeared to be a backlash against this controversy.

Cart states that it returned to the sentimentality of the 1940s during this period. For example,

romance fiction became popular again (37). Cart cites the Sweet Valley High books as a prime

example (Cart 39). They follow twins Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield as they make their way

through high school.   The *Sweet Valley High* books often explored their romantic exploits. Such

titles did little to help the cultural legitimacy of teen novels, though. In addition, the 1980s also

saw an increasingly focus on series books. They were literally mass produced. Cart writes, "The

new romances, however, had little individual identity; they were slick, mass-market paper series

appearing at the rate of one new title per month" (Cart 38). For example, there are almost 200

books in the *Sweet Valley High* series alone ("List of Sweet Valley High Books" par. 1). This

number does not include the Sweet Valley Kids, Sweet Valley Junior High, Sweet Valley

University, the Unicorn Club, Elizabeth, and Sweet Valley High: Senior Year spin-offs. Again,

this reinforced the idea that teen novels are poorly written. Publishers appeared to be so focused

on churning out new titles that they did not care about the quality of their books.

Despite this, the 1990s saw another boom in Young Adult literature. Cart writes that it

was "the beginning of a remarkable period of renaissance that has continued to the present day"

(Cart 57). Part of this greater acceptance was due to academia. Scholars started devoting more

time to studying teen literature (Cart 58). For example, Sarah Hertz and Don Gallo published

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From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics in

1996 (Cart 58). Several literary awards for teen fiction were also developed literary prizes for

teen fiction during this time. The Printz Award was launched in 1998 (Cart 70). Now young

adult fiction is a booming market. Twenty years ago, publishers released about 3,000 titles a year

which could be classified as teen fiction. Now the average hovers around 300,000, generating

about three billion dollars a year in revenue. YA fiction is so popular that even adults are

famous for reading them (Brown par. 1).

Interestingly, YA fiction is one of two writing categories in the sample expected to hold

up to the same scrutiny as literary fiction. Heather Booth, author of *Serving Teens through*

Readers' Advisory, provides suggestions for examining this type of fiction. She writes that

librarians should look for pacing, characterization, story line, tone, and style, qualities embraced

by mainstream reviewers (Booth 24). By doing so, she asserts that young adult literature can and

should be complex. This idea is backed up by the proliferation of awards for young adult novels.

For example, the Printz was created by the American Library Association in 2000 in honor of

Michael Printz, a school librarian from Kansas. Every year it "honors the best book written for

teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year" ("Michael L. Printz" par 1). This formal

recognition by literary gatekeepers is something that many other genres lack. However, awards

like the Printz assert that teen novels can be just as complex as fiction for adults.

Despite this, criticism of YA literature seems to have increased even more over the years.

At least once a year, a major paper publishes an article questioning the legitimacy of books for

teens. One of the most recent examples is a 2014 *Slate* article entitled "Against YA: Adults

Should Be Embarrassed to Read Children's Book." Author Ruth Graham makes a few points

calling into question the quality of YA literature. However, her main argument is that it simply

lacks depth. She writes that "YA books present the teenage perspective in a fundamentally

uncritical way" (par. 2). Graham gives the example of the smash hit *The Fault in Our Stars* by

John Green. She acknowledges that it is wildly successful. However, the journalist argues that it

lacks the complexity of novels for adults (Graham par. 7). While the characters encounter a

number of obstacles—to their physical health as well as their mental wellbeing—they are

ultimately still likable. Graham argues that rarely are people in highbrow fiction so neatly

categorized.

Book bloggers, though, subvert the idea that YA fiction cannot be enjoyable and well-

developed at the same time. One good example is a review of *The Testing* by Joelle

Charbonneau. It is about the United Commonwealth which is left in ruins after the Seven Stages

War. Only a small group of people is ever chosen to attend college. In order to prove their

worthiness, though, candidates must first pass The Testing. Cia Vale is excited when she is

selected to undergo the rigorous series of trials. However, her father offers her some advice

beforehand: "Trust no one." Despite this warning, she forms an alliance with Tomas, one of her

friends from childhood. Can she really trust him during the Testing, though?

While some bloggers wait to express their personal opinions, Erica at the Book Cellar

weaves hers throughout the review. Right away, she signals that the novel is an enjoyable read.

The blogger gushes, "THIS BOOK IS MY FAVORITE! Read it read it read it" (Erica "The

Testing" par. 5). Immediately, this lets readers know that the book has a lowbrow quality. Her enthusiasm is just too much to contain.

However, the blogger quickly jumps into a formal literary assessment of the novel; it appears to be just as developed as others works of fiction. First, Erica writes that the setting is intricate. It is "a futuristic world that will captivate you" (Erica "The Testing" par. 6). Even though it is set in a dystopian future, the setting still seems believable (Erica "The Testing" par. 10). In addition, the characterization is strong. Cia is smart and strong-willed. Charbonneau even takes the time to develop secondary characters like Michal. He did not do a lot but was one of the blogger's favorites (Erica "The Testing" par. 11). In addition, the plot is thrilling. It is never clear whether Cia can trust anyone (Erica "The Testing" par. 8). All of these elements speak to the novel's literary quality.

However, Erica comes back to her own feelings about the novel at the end of the review. She concludes, "It has been awhile since I have become so emotionally invested in a book. By the time I finished, I felt like my heart had been forced through a paper shredder. The characters and the plot, I just was so attached" (Erica "The Testing" par. 12). Clearly, the novel offers an emotional connection for the blogger, one of the primary characteristics of the lowbrow. Despite this, it is obvious that *The Testing* is no ordinary YA fiction. The novel is as well developed as other fictional works.

Finally, bloggers refute the idea that YA fiction only examines romance, looking at a variety of genres, including fantasy. A good example is a review of Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Boys* that appeared on Jen Robinson's Book Page. It is about a girl named Blue Sargent

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whose mother and aunts are psychic. She did not inherit their ability to read minds, but possesses another extraordinary power: she amplifies other people's use of magic. One day she sees the ghost of a boy who has not died yet, Richard Gansey, a student at the local boys' prep school. One day, Blue meets him in real life, along with his friends Ronan, Noah, and Adam. Blue uses her ability to help them search for the tomb of a mystical Welsh king.

Immediately, it is clear that *The Raven Boys* subverts the idea that YA fiction only looks at romance.   There is the hint of a love triangle; it is unclear whether Blue will fall for Adam or Gansey. However, it is not the focal point of the story, according to the blogger (Robinson par. 9). Robinson writes that "it's nice to see a book carried along by plot, theme, and character, rather than by the romance" (Robinson par. 10).

To reinforce this point, Robinson spends more time unpacking the other literary elements. She writes that the characters are "unconventional yet fully three-dimensional." In addition, the plot is nuanced. There are layers to the story which are slowly revealed over the course of her book. The setting is also "vividly depicted." The author's descriptions of the small town of Henrietta, Virginia are lush (Robinson par. 4).   Finally, Robinson lauds Stiefvater's writing style, writing, "She just wows me over and over again with her prose." The blogger states that she read the book slowly because she kept stopping to highlight beautiful passages (Robinson par. 4).

Robinson ends by giving the book four stars, recommending it for any reader, whether boy or girl. This is no small feat considering how teen literature is highly gendered (Robinson par. 11). The blogger's review is especially notable, though, because it is so rigorous. Robinson

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include everything that a mainstream reviewer would cover. This shows that YA fiction can be complex, even more so than many adult novels.

Another example of a well-rounded YA fiction review looks at *Oathbreaker's Shadow* by Amy McCulloch. In the novel, characters wear bracelets full of knots representing the promises which they make (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 3). People cannot fully make promises until they are sixteen (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 4). If members of the culture break a promise, though, they are forced into the desert to live with the Chauk. This is what happens to Raim. His future as a Yun soldier is ruined when his bracelet catches on fire as a result of a promise someone made for him. He must flee or face execution (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 5).

A Dribble of Ink blogger Justin Landon demonstrates that the novel is both fun and multi-faceted at the same time. He comments that the book "is great fun to read." Raim is a fierce warrior and there is a lot of action (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 10). However, the blogger spends most of the review explaining the book's literary qualities. He writes that the setting is well developed.

In addition, the story is "gorgeous."   Landon writes that this is due in large part to the characterization. Readers get to see Raim as he tries to make a new life for himself in a culture which he has always shunned. The hero is forced to deal with the stigma of inadvertently breaking a promise in the process. The blogger writes, "not only does he have to overcome the shame of mistakes couched in his own culture, he has to grow beyond a constrained perspective to survive in a new one" (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 8).   By doing so, the author also expertly explores the theme of forgiveness (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 6).

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The blogger's only complaint is that the story itself is not complete. There are still several unanswered questions at the end because the author plans on writing a sequel. Despite this, the author found a natural point to end the novel, according to Landon.

Landon concludes that even though the novel is geared to teens, it will appeal to everyone. This is especially clear when he remarks that author Amy McCulloch who is an editor at Harper Voyager by day knows "what makes story tick" (Landon "Oathbreakers" par. 12). Even though this is her first novel, she clearly knows a lot about the book industry, expertly combining escape and the literary.

Young Adult fiction bloggers also looked at other genres such as mystery.   A Good Books & Good Wine post about Brenna Yovanoff's *Paper Valentine* is a good example. It is about a girl named Hannah who investigates a string of murders in her hometown.   Interestingly, the novel also borrows heavily from fantasy. Hannah works with the ghost of her best friend Lillian to solve a string of murders committed by the Valentine Killer. There is even a hint of romance in the book. Hannah develops a crush on Finny Boone, even though "he's a legit wrong side of the tracks sort of person." (April "Paper Valentine" par. 2)

Blogger Julia does not jump into an analysis of the novel right away. Instead, she begins by explaining that this is not the first book by Yovanoff that she has read. She loved the author's first novel, *The Replacements*. This provides a context for better understanding Julia's review. It shows that the she already has a good grasp on Yovanoff's writing style. As a result, it means even more when the blogger goes on to state, "I found myself highlighting passages on my Kindle, and hopping onto g-chat to hash out theories and OMGs" (April "Paper Valentine" par.

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1). This also helps to establish the book as lowbrow. The blogger forefronts the enjoyment which she felt reading the book.

The blogger immediately subverts this idea, though, by looking at a variety of the book's elements, starting with character development. She writes that Hannah has her share of faults. However, they make her even more likable. Julia goes on to write, "she's the sort of character who lets other people railroad her and walk all over her, but as this is a coming of age book, she does grow and start to own her voice and feelings" (April "Paper Valentine" par. 3).   This adds to her depth as a character. She is not just static but evolves over the course of book.

Interestingly, Julia does not offer much analysis of Finny. She simply states that he is not the bad boy that he initially seems to be (April "Paper Valentine" par. 5).   Instead, she spends much more time describing Hannah's family. The blogger writes that the protagonist's stepfather has tattoos. She explains that "sure he comes off as scary but Hannah and Ariel see him as a father and he makes them pancakes and listens to them and proves appearances can be deceiving." In addition, Hannah's mom is a worry wart. Julia even describes Hannah's little sister, writing that it is clear the two share a deep bond. This might seem insignificant because Hannah's family does not play a pivotal role in the novel. However, it shows that her mom, stepdad, and sister are more than stock characters. Many authors in the category do not often bother developing the protagonists' family members because they are not integral to the plot, as Julia writes. However, she believes that this only adds to the realism of the novel (April "Paper Valentine" par. 4).

Only after unpacking the author's characterization does she attempt to analyze the love story. It is obvious that the blogger appreciates this aspect of the novel. She writes, "OH OH and you guys of course there is swooning involved" (April "Paper Valentine" par. 5). The blogger's effusive description of her feelings again hints that the book is lowbrow. However, Julie continues by explaining that romance does not overwhelm the story. Hannah is her own character whose development does not hinge on Finny. While romance is intriguing to the blogger, it is not the only thing that she cares about. This also refutes the idea that YA literature focuses excessively on romance.

The blogger wraps up the review by talking about Yovanoff's writing style. She states that the author "does not use 100 words when ten will do, but at the same time it doesn't feel too sparse. It's the sort of book where if you were to read it out loud the words will just roll off your tongue" (April "Paper Valentine" par. 7). She does not offer much explanation except to say that she highlighted several passages because they are so beautiful. However, not much more needs to be said. Julia gives a well-rounded perspective on the novel. It clearly rejects the stereotype that YA literature cannot be developed.

Finally, YA book bloggers examine science fiction. An example of a well-rounded review looks at *Quantum Coin* by E.C. Myers. SF Signal blogger Nick Sharps describes the sequel to *Fair Coin* as "*Back to the Future* meets *Three's Company*" (Sharps par. 1). It is about a teen boy named Ephraim Scott who uses time travel to prevent his best friend from committing a crime. Afterward, he cannot wait to return to his normal time. However, his plan comes to a screeching halt when his girlfriend from another dimension suddenly appears. This is the

beginning of an unusual love triangle. Ephraim must figure out which version of his girlfriend

he loves the most while also fixing the space-time continuum (Sharps par. 5).

In this review, Sharps places the love story front and center, even though the novel is

classified as science fiction and the site primarily focuses on the genre. He begins by stating that

he actually hates romance. The blogger writes, "So often the relationships feel forced and

artificial. And that's just the regular relationships, not even taking into account the godawful

love-triangles" (Sharps par. 7). However, Sharps could not get enough of it in this book. Right

away, this admission sets the tone for the review—*Quantum Coin* is much more than a

stereotypical YA novel. It is so good that the Myers made the blogger enjoy a love story.

This is in part a testament to how the author develops characters, according to

Sharps. He writes, "Myers doesn't write an adult in an adolescent's body like a lot of YA

authors." Ephraim seems like a real teenager. Myers also really develops the characters of Zoe

and Jena. Even though they are versions of each other from different worlds, the two still seem

unique (Sharps par. 8). Not only does this add to their characterization, it makes the romance

seem more authentic.

Only after describing the book's romance does Sharps delve into the novel's scientific

aspects. He writes that the author does a good job of describing how time travel works. Sharps

states, "There is enough detail to support the plot without overloading the novel with

information" (Sharps par. 9). In addition, the pacing is quick. Characters move the plot along by

rushing from universe to universe (Sharps par. 10). This helps to keep readers enthralled. The

blogger's only complaint is that "Loose ends tie up a little too neatly." Otherwise, the blogger

highly recommends *Quantum Coin,* giving it four out of five stars, further smashing

preconceptions that YA fiction is a lowbrow writing category (Sharps par. 4).

Finally, a Book Smugglers review of *All Our Pretty Songs* by Sarah McCarry points to

the complexity of YA fiction. It is "a retelling of the Orpheus myth," according to blogger Ana

("Pretty Songs" par. 8). However, the author puts a new spin on an old tale. The novel focuses

on two girls—Aurora and the narrator who remains nameless. Their friendship is threatened

when they both fall in love with the same guy, a musician named Jack. However, there is a

larger force threatening the two girls (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 2). Jack can make people do

anything with his music (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 10). However, his music also summons a

malevolent supernatural force (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 2).

Interestingly, Ana begins by explaining why she read the novel; she states that she is a

fan of McCarry's blog, The Rejectionist. The reviewer writes, "I've always loved her input, her

reviews and her essays and when I learned she had a book coming out, I did a small jig. I did"

(Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 7). Right away, this helps to establish the author as an authority. Even

though she is not well-known, McCarry has already established herself as knowledgeable about

books.

Ana goes on to examine the book's fictional elements, stating that McCarry does a good

job of showing what it is like being a teenager. According to Graham in her *Slate* article, teens

are typically shown as shallow. However, McCarry portrays the narrator's relationships with her

family and friends in depth. The complexity of her feelings for Jack are also clear. Ana writes,

"there is a lot of *negotiating* that happens between how freely she has given her body and her

heart and the fact that sometimes this is not enough to the *other* person" (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 13). The author denies the idea that teen characters do not have legitimate relationships.

Ana also addresses the novel's point of view. She writes, "the narrative is kind of dream-like and there are parts where there is a bit of stream of consciousness" (Ana "Pretty Songs" par 12). In addition, the narrator deals with heavy themes. However, her point of view is still "insulated" because she is naïve (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 12). This only makes the narrator even more believable as a seventeen-year-old girl, though.

Finally, the blogger addresses the main character's story arc.   Readers get to see the narrator as she figures out her self-worth (Ana "Pretty" par. 13). She starts off as a wall flower. The narrator is plain compared to Aurora, or so she thinks. As a result, she does not believe herself "worthy" of attention from Jack (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 11). However, the narrator displays a lot of determination in the face of adversity. This is clear in one quote from the novel, "I will not let the terror of the dark get hold of me. If this is a test, I will fucking pass it" (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 18). The narrator's story arc shows that she more depth than she believes. By addressing the novel's characterization, the blogger demonstrates that the novel is enjoyable but also complex, deserving of eight out of ten stars (Ana "Pretty Songs" par. 28).

Children's Literature

Perhaps some of the most interesting reviews among the blogs in the sample were for children's books. There are a few kinds. Picture books are geared to very young children, combining text and images to tell a story. Easy readers are the next step in literature for kids. They are often forty to fifty pages long. However, easies contain much simpler text so young

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children can read them on their own. While these readers also include images, they are not as integral to the storyline as in picture books. Famous examples of easies are the Dr. Seuss and Amelia Bedelia books. Finally, children's literature includes regular fiction. Unlike other categories of writing in the sample, though, it is expected to hold a certain amount of value within society.   However, even within children's literature, there is a hierarchy of value. Some works are considered to have value while genre titles are viewed negatively.

Scholars Michael Tunnell and James Jacobs write that children's literature was created in the late 1600s with the publication of John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. The philosopher was the first to suggest that children have their own separate reading materials (80). Tunnel and Jacobs write, "This was an idea that had never crossed the minds of the general populace." Up until this point, children were expected to behave like adults, much like teens. For example, children often held jobs during this period. Part of this also meant that that they were forced to read the same books. Children occasionally read hornbooks which taught the alphabet, but most of their reading was limited to religious materials like the Bible (Tunnell and Jacobs 80-81). Even after the publication of Locke's treatise, though, the idea that children should have their own books was slow to take hold within society. According to the authors, it only gained traction in the twentieth century. This shift was due in part to the passage of child labor laws. Such laws reinforced the idea that kids have special developmental needs and should therefore be treated differently (Tunnell and Jacobs 80).

Children's literature began to solidify in the 1700s when John Newbery established his own publishing house for young readers (81).   He published classics like *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland and *The Jungle Book*. However, children's books were still largely viewed as instructional tools during this time. Tunnell and Jacobs write, "the moralistic tale continued to dominate children's literature, even in many of Newbery's books" (81). This started to change in the late 1800s though as an increasing number of authors started writing books just for children. Literary scholar David Russell writes that this was due to a few factors. First and foremost, children started to live longer as advancements in medicine were made. In addition, women started to gain more rights during this period. As they advanced in society, women started taking on a number of occupations, including that of author. According to Russell, women made up the majority of children's authors during this period. Finally, as previously stated, the printing revolution made the creation and distribution of a greater variety of books possible, including children's titles (Russell 12). All of these factors contributed to the sense that books for children constituted their own body of work.

Another phenomenon emerged within the landscape of children's literature during the 1800s. More and more books started to include illustrations. Until this time, images within children's books largely consisted of wood-block prints (Russell 16). As technology advanced, though, color illustrations became the standard (Tunnell and Jacobs 82). The first children's book illustrator to become widely recognized was Randolph Caldecott, the namesake for the ALA award. Russell writes that he "is credited with ringing liveliness and humor to children's book illustration" (116). While Caldecott helped to stimulate the field of children's literature, illustrations were always secondary to the plot. The first picture book is considered to be *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, published in 1900 (Tunnel and Jacobs 82). According to Tunnel and

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Jacobs, author Beatrix Potter was the first to combine picture and text in her story telling (82). Each was integral to the plot. The author paved the way for other famous pictures books which were published around this time, including the Mother Goose books, *The Wind in the Willows*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Russell 16).

However, the spread of children's literature was not without controversy. Many books for young readers during the late 1800s and early 1900s took the form of dime novels. They largely featured adventurous storylines about young, poor children suddenly becoming wealthy, such as the *Ragged Dick* novels by Horatio Alger (Anderson 92). However, educators quickly tried to distance themselves from the cheaply produced books. According to scholars, "librarians had become the guardians of children's reading," publishing reading guides, decreeing certain children's titles to be more acceptable than others (Lerer 275). For example, Lillian Smith published *The Unreluctant Years* in 1953. It argued that children can have their own literature; however, books should still hold up to the same standards as those for adults (Ross 641). She railed against "'written-to-formula books'" and "'time fillers'" (qtd. in Ross 641). Even the ALA shared these sentiments (Ross 642). The association created awards such as the Newbery in the 1920s, distributed to the best children's novels published every year. It was an attempt to steer readers toward "only the best" (Ross 647). By critiquing dime novels, librarians played an important role in helping to establish children's literature as a field. At the same time, they created a hierarchy among children's titles, with genre fiction at the bottom.

As a result, children's literature really started to thrive in the 1950s. This was also due in large part due to government-issued grants for school libraries. Suddenly, they had the funds to

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large quantities of children's books; publishers, in turn, rushed to meet the demand. Many

classics were published during this period such as *Charlotte's Web* and *The Lion, The Witch, and

the Wardrobe*. Around this same time, publishers also started producing a greater variety of

titles. Similar to young adult fiction, books for children began tackling social issues (Tunnell

and Jacobs 83). According to Tunnel and Jacobs, "Long standing taboos imposed on authors and

illustrators started to break down as the social revolution of the 1960s began to boil." Books

addressed real world topics such as drugs, divorce, and child abuse. For example, author Judy

Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* for frankly writing about menstruation. In

addition, books started showing greater representation of minorities during this time. A good

example is Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day,* published in 1962. Tunnell and Jacobs write that it

was "the first picture book to show a black child as a protagonist with no vestiges of negative

stereotyping" (83).

There was another shift within children's literature just a couple decades later. This time,

though, it had a negative impact on the cultural value of books for kids. This was when

publishers started viewing children's literature as a business which could generate substantial

revenue. The number of books published during this time increased dramatically, from

approximately 2,500 titles a year to 4,500 (Tunnell and Jacobs 83). The sudden popularity in

children's literature was in large part due to the greater acceptance of paperback publishing

(Tunnell and Jacobs 83). Series books became especially popular during this time. They were

thin, quickly produced novels usually revolving around the same set of characters   Popular

series titles included *Goosebumps, Fear Street, The Babysitters Club, American Girl, Bailey*

School Kids, Saddle Club, and *Animorphs*. Even though they were wildly successful, many

people viewed children's series with disdain. The paperback novels were equated with the dime

novels of the early twentieth century, cheaply produced novels with little cultural worth, relying

on stock characters and standardized plots to sell the maximum number of titles (Tunnell and

Jacobs 83).

Children's literature is now more popular than ever. This increase in acceptance was due

in part to the work of literary gatekeepers such as librarians. For example, the ALA established

awards such as Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award and the Geisel awarded every year to

the best titles for beginning readers. According to Tunnell and Jacobs, the success of Harry

Potter also played a large role in making children's literature more widely accepted. The

financial success of the series was too great to ignore (85). However, there remains a distinct

hierarchy among titles. Picture books have to be instant classics in order to get

published. Parents and educators do not want to risk exposing young children to anything other

than the best literature. There is also a greater acceptance of more popular forms of children's

literature, such as comic books and series books such as *Captain Underpants*. However, they are

expected to hold up to the same standards as fiction for adults. According to librarian Kathleen

Horning, reviewers should assess titles for plot, character development, setting, style, point of

view, and theme. Not only that, she asserts that children's books can all be developed equally,

just like literary fiction.

This divide was also very clear among bloggers in the sample. They often reviewed well-

established picture book authors such as Carmen Agra Deedy and Mo Willems who are favorites

among teachers and librarians. Bloggers very rarely reviewed easy readers. When they did,

bloggers looked at classics such as the fiftieth anniversary reissue of Peggy Parrish's *Amelia

Bedelia*.   There was a little more wiggle room among books for older children, though.

Bloggers reviewed some titles by authors who are considered to have more value such as Rita

Williams Garcia. However, bloggers also examined a variety of genre titles, asserting that they

could be enjoyable as well as complex.

Children's book bloggers were limited in the genres which they addressed, though. For

example, bloggers sometimes looked at science fiction, such as a review of *Lenny Cyrus, School

Virus* by Joel Schreiber. The book is about a middle school boy who shrinks himself to the size

of a germ. He hopes that he can get his crush, Zooey, to like him if he infiltrates her brain

(Robinson "Lenny Cyrus" par.2). Along the way, Lenny learns about the human body

(Robinson "Lenny Cyrus" par.17).

Blogger Jen Robinson's assessment of the book is short but demonstrates a mixture of the

literary and fun. She mostly comments on how the characters' voices are developed. Each

chapter switches points of view among Lenny, his friend Harlan, and Zooey. Sometimes it is

difficult to differentiate who is speaking, according to the blogger.   While the voices of the

characters are not very distinct, though, the illustrations set them apart. Robinson writes that

they "are helpful in conveying the different personalities of the three kids" (Robinson "Lenny

Cyrus" par. 17). Even though the blogger's assessment shows that the book is not perfect, it

clearly grapples with developing literary elements.

However, the blogger also commends the plot for being enjoyable.   She states that the author does a good job of explaining scientific concepts while at the same time being humorous (Robinson "Lenny Cyrus" par. 7). For example, the novel includes statements like, "Behind her glasses, her eyes were that pure methylene blue that you only see in perfectly balanced chemical solutions" (Robinson "Lenny Cyrus" par. 11). The blogger writes that *Lenny Cyrus, School Virus* is full of these kinds of jokes.

Robinson concludes by acknowledging that the title might not serve everyone's interests. She recommends the book, though, stating that, "if you know any middle grade or middle school-age kids who like science and/or adventure, and have a good sense of humor, I think they'll enjoy this book" (Robinson "Lenny Cyrus" par. 19). *Lenny Cyrus, School Virus* is obviously a combination of the lowbrow and literary.

Fantasy, though, was overwhelmingly the most popular among children's fiction bloggers. A good example of a well-rounded review looks at *Stolen Magic* by Stephanie Burgis. It is the final installment in a series of books featuring Kat Stephenson, a girl living in Regency-era English (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 5). A number of events conspire to prevent her sister Angelina's wedding (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 6). Kat gets swept up in the drama, while at the same time trying to save the Order of the Guardian, a society of magicians to which she belongs. It has been the subject of a robbery, and she has to find the culprit (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 7).

Book Smugglers blogger Thea begins by explaining why she reviewed the novel. She states that she read the first two novels in the series and is a big fan of the protagonist. The blogger writes "not just because she's smart, headstrong, and impetuous, but because she's got a

great burning curiosity and an equally fiery temper, and at the heart of everything she is and does, Kat is a young woman with a deep sense of justice and love" (Thea "Stolen Magic" par.15). From her description of the protagonist, readers can see that the character is well-rounded.

Adding to this, Thea states that the heroine grows a lot in this novel. In the first two books in the series, she is hard to control. In *Stolen Magic*, though, the heroine is where she starts to demonstrate some restraint. In the past, she would have been easily angered by all the events in the novel. This time around, though, readers see her as she "bites her tongue." The blogger goes on to state that this growth is done in a way that is believable. According to Thea, "she does still run headlong into danger, but there's more of a thoughtful reasoning process to it all" (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 15). Clearly, Kat is more than a stock character.

The blogger continues by commenting on the development of the secondary characters. She writes that most display some sort of growth. Charles, Kat's older brother, has evolved somewhat since the last book. He used to drink a lot and gamble. However, he gives up these old ways during this novel. In addition, more is revealed about their father. Up until this point, he is shown as "quiet, bookish, withdrawn." However, readers learn more about his background, including some secrets about his deceased wife which he had been keeping, during this novel (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 16). It is believed that secondary characters within fantasy do not always receive such thorough treatment. Burgis, though, reveals that this does not have to be the case.

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Finally, Thea addresses the book's plot. It has several story lines going on simultaneously. The novel looks at the theft of several relics from the Guardian. In addition, Kat is being hunted by a boy. Finally, there are a few death threats against various members of the Stephenson family. Moreover, "…there's plenty of magic and daring-do—even a little bit of treason!" All of these make for "a mystery with a few good twists" (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 18).

Thea ends by giving *Stolen Magic* eight out of ten stars. It is obvious from her description that the book is more than a stereotypical genre novel. At the same time, the blogger demonstrates that she enjoyed it. She writes that "I absolutely, wholeheartedly *loved* this book, and I dearly hope to see more of Kat in the future" (Thea "Stolen Magic" par. 19). Her enthusiasm conveys a certain lowbrow aspect to the novel.

Another interesting review of fantasy looks at *The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairyland* by Catherynne Valente. It is the sequel to *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairy Land in a Ship of Her Own Making*. September, the protagonist, has not been to Fairyland in a year and longs to go there. However, when she finally has a chance to go there, it has changed significantly. September must save residents from the mysterious Alleyman (April "Fairyland" par. 2).

Good Books & Good Wine blogger April's review is interesting because it goes back and forth between the emotional and the formal. She begins by commenting on how much she enjoyed the story. The blogger writes that this was due in part to the fact that it provided a certain amount of nostalgia. The stories about fairies reminded her of her childhood. She asks, "Do you guys remember being kids and believing that anything was possible? I'll admit I am a

little jaded with old age. However, Valente's latest brings back some of the magic of youth in the best possible way" (April "Fairyland" par. 1). This is an important part of her appreciation of the novel.

From there, though, the blogger goes on to comment on the novel's literary elements, including the characterization. She writes that September "is absolutely not a stagnant character." The protagonist was a little self-centered in the first novel. She is still brave and resourceful in this book; however, September cares more about other characters (April "Fairyland" par.3). This is not a weakness, though, but just adds depth to her character.

Next, April returns to her own feelings about the book. She states that it is dark in tone. Most of the novel takes place in Below-Fairyland which is more of a threat. This gives the plot a sense of urgency. The author goes on to write, "AND okay, I need to put this out there, but I totally did a little silent cry at the end of this being super emotional and all, because like I said, it's melancholy and you'll find yourself making certain attachments" (April "Fairyland" par. 4). Again, enjoyment is integral to the blogger's enjoyment of the novel.

The blogger switches one more time to talk about formal literary elements. April states that Valente does a great job of painting "fabulous pictures with imagery." Her vivid writing in turn really helped to flesh out the setting. Valente stated that she felt "immersed" in the fairy world. It contained interesting details such as coffee and tea royalists. The details of the author's world were also completely unique. The blogger writes that the only comparison that she can think of is *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster. This is significant because the novel is a classic within children's literature. By comparing *The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairy*

Land to such a well-known title, the blogger shows that it also has cultural value, in addition to displaying lowbrow characteristics (April "Fairyland" par. 5).

Finally, a review of Diane Zahler's *Sleeping Beauty's Daughters* shows the complexity of children's genre fiction. It is one of many books in the Fairy Tale Princesses series. This novel focuses on two princesses, Luna and Aurora, who live in a castle secluded from the rest of the world, afraid of the spell originally cast on their mother (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 2). One day, though, they decide to find their fairy godmother so that she can break it. Along the way, the princesses encounter several obstacles. However, the two overcome them with the help of Symon, a fisherman (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 4).

There's a Book blogger Jen Robinson gives the book a glowing recommendation, calling it "an absolute favorite" (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 10). She writes that it is hard to find a series of books where each novel is consistently good. Robinson continues by writing that every title in the Fairy Princesses series is "unique" (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 7). In fact, the blogger writes *Sleeping Beauty's Daughters* might be her favorite in the series. This has a lot to do with Zahler's "superb writing," a quality not usually associated with fantasy fiction (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 9).

However, much of Robinson's appreciation of the novel comes from how much she personally connects with the story. She writes that "Perhaps it's that I come from a family of three sisters, but I couldn't help but instantly connecting with sisters Aurora and Luna." The blogger states that the author realistically portrays the "love-hate" relationship which sister share.

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Aurora and Luna share a lot of tension but also humor (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 8). The blogger ends by calling them "a pair you can't help but connect with," thereby emphasizing the lowbrow quality of the book (Smith "Sleeping Beauty's Daughters" par. 9).

<div align="center">Comic Books</div>

Only one blog in the sample, Forbidden Planet, reviews comic books. This could be because it is the most culturally suspect of all the genres. Comic books are often viewed as the purview of socially awkward nerds, unworthy of serious consideration. Popular depictions of comic book readers seem to confirm this. For example, Comic Book Guy from the Simpsons is overweight, slovenly, and quick to remind others of their short-comings. He is so expendable that he does not even have a real name; instead, Comic Book Guy is defined purely by what he reads. In addition, comic books are often viewed as fodder for movies, not serious literature. Comic book scholar Paul Lopes writes, "Hollywood seems addicted to this culture, churning out blockbuster film after blockbuster film based on a superhero or another comic book genre." (Lopes 11). A proliferation of movies such as the *Hulk, Spider Man, Batman, X-Men*, and the *Avengers* seems to confirm this.

Such views of comic books go back to their inception. Again, their beginnings coincide with the rise of paperback publishing. Lopes states that comic strips had long appeared in newspapers. It was not until the 1930s, though, that they were released in book form (Lopes 1). All of the most famous comic book publishers started during this period. Lopes writes, "The four most successful publishers of comic books in the United States…were from the pulp industry: DC, Marvel, Dell, and Archie" (Lopes 30). Publishers were well-known for superhero

comics. For example, the first *Superman,* released in 1938, launched a rabid interest in the burgeoning art form (Lopes 2). Comic books during this time were widely regarded as lowbrow, though. Critics said that their storylines were too violent. In addition, they asserted that publishers were more concerned with generating revenue than literary quality. Lopes writes, "Another defining characteristic…was the field's logic of selling whatever the buyer desired" (Lopes 33). Publishers did little to counter these ideas, proudly embracing violence as a marketing technique.

Hatred toward comic books increased throughout the 1940s as many questioned their literary value. Critics especially worried about their effects on children. For example, Sterling North wrote a scathing magazine editorial entitled "A National Disgrace" questioning comics' effects on young readers. (Lopes 60). The editorial was printed in several newspapers, kicking off a nationwide crusade against the genre (Lopes 60). Educators also worried that comic books would discourage children from reading serious literature (Lopes 60). They published different reading guides during this time to counteract this (Lopes 62). In response, D.C. Comics formed a review board to guarantee that its titles were not harmful. Each comic received a special seal, guaranteeing that it was acceptable for children. The industry was crippled in the process, though. Many publishers folded due to the increased criticism. As Lopes writes, "Where once more than 50 comics publishers prospered, today there are less than a dozen publishing houses of any magnitude" (Lopes 90).

Comic book writers and artists were forced underground during the 1950s and 1960s as a result of this backlash. However, they formed their own networks independent of mainstream

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publishers during this period (Lopes 103). Hundreds of underground newspapers popped up, including the *L.A. Free Press* and the *East Village Others* (Lopes 103). Indie artists found refuge among their ranks (Lopes 10). There they discovered a couple of advantages to being shunned by the literary establishment. First and foremost, independent artists had the freedom to address a greater variety of storylines, not just those deemed morally appropriate. Lopes states that they "radically transformed comic books with adult material from the most profane to the most political" (Lopes 12). Many were sexually charged in nature. In addition, independent comic book artists could play more with drawing styles (Lopes 102). They were no longer limited to the superhero aesthetic of mainstream comic books; these artists could do anything that they wanted. One of the most famous examples is comic book author and illustrator R. Crumb. His work became extremely popular in the late 1960s. It was covered by the *New York Times*. Crumb even published his own book, garnering a lot of attention for the underground movement (Lopes 107-8).

Suddenly, independent comic books were not so independent anymore; they were a booming industry (Lopes 105). Multiple factors contributed to their surge in popularity other than the increasing focus on Crumb. Foremost among them, though, vendors dramatically restructured how comic books were sold. Until this point, they were only available through mail order (Lopes 100). However, stores started selling them directly to customers (Lopes 127). They promised to keep any that did no sell immediately, marketing them as "back issues." As a result, publishers did not have to worry about returns, at the same time increasing the amount of revenue that they generated (Lopes 126). Lopes writes that "a boom in comic shops quickly

followed" (Lopes 127). Until the 1970s, there were only about twenty comic book shops

nationwide. Because of this restructuring, more and more joined the field (Lopes 128).

Despite their newfound popularity, there was still a stigma attached to reading comics.

Now the term "fan boy" is used to describe anyone who is an enthusiast of a particular

subculture. In the 1970s, though, it was used primarily in reference to comic book readers

(Lopes 131). As Lopes writes "The fanboy stereotype was of an asocial young male who pays

little attention to his personal appearance and devotes considerable time and devotion to certain

mainstream comic books" (Lopes 136). Many people began looking for ways to make comic

books more legitimate in response to this criticism. The primary way that they did this was by

publishing scholarship on the genre. For example, Lopes cites Will Eisner's *Comics and*

Sequential Art and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as famous examples. In addition, a

new form of comic emerged during the late 1980s—the graphic novel. It gave comic book

artists more space to explore literary themes. In addition, the art work of the new form is

generally viewed as more sophisticated (Lopes 156-9). As a result, graphic novels are often

viewed as more culturally legitimate than mainstream comic books.

Only within the last twenty years have comics seen widespread acceptance.   There has

been an explosion of different types of comics, from manga to web comics. Even many

librarians and teachers now champion their literary worth, using comics as instructional tools

(Lopes 152). Despite these developments, stereotypes about comic books persist. For example,

Comic Con is a convention held every year in San Diego. Not only does it attract readers of

comic books, but it also used to promote the newest blockbuster movies and popular TV shows.

People attend in the thousands, dressing up as their favorite superheroes. This only perpetuates the idea that comic books are a mass phenomenon, though. For example, Lopes writes that critics such as Hilton Kramer, editor of the *New Criterion*, remain skeptical of their literary value. He once stated that comic books are "'non-sense' aimed at 'people who don't want to tax their mind and yet still want to be regarded as cultivated'" (Lopes 161). This is an opinion shared by many literary gatekeepers.

Comic book scholars show that this not the case, though, asserting that comic books can and should be considered literature. For example, readers' librarian Francisca Goldsmith advises readers to look at plot, character, language, and setting, the same elements outlined by mainstream reviewers (6). Author Scott McLeod tackles how to analyze their artwork in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible A*rt. He outlines a few characteristics which readers should look for when analyzing comics. First, he states that an artist's use of line is important for interpreting his or her meaning. A wavy line, for example, sends a very different message than a thick, straight line. The former conveys a sense of fear or uncertainty; the latter is bold (McLeod 125). The same applies to a comic book's use of color. Each has its own cultural connotation (McLeod 192). The color green conjures thoughts of springtime and growth while the color red denotes passion and danger. These associations also contribute to comic books' meanings. Finally, composition is crucial to understanding their significance. Readers have to look at how all of the elements fit together. Elements such as line, color, and composition have to be balanced so that one does not overwhelm the others just like with any other piece of art (McLeod 170).

All of these elements can be seen in the reviews posted on book blog Forbidden Planet, boldly challenging the idea that comic books are only lowbrow. Sometimes reviewers looked at older comics. This is clear in a review of *Shako* by Pat Mills, John Wagner, and Ramon Sola, originally published in the 1970s. The comic book is about a polar bear that turns into a human after swallowing a special pill made by the CIA. Perplexed by his transformation, Shako goes on a killing spree. CIA agent Jake Falmuth tries to stop him with little success (Bacon par. 3).

The blogger does not go into too much detail about the elements outlined by Goldsmith. However, he still demonstrates that it is complex, carefully developing a number of fictional elements. Blogger James Bacon spends most of the review examining the graphic novel for symbols. He writes that Shako is a commentary on how people treat animals. Agent Falmuth is sometimes more deadly than the polar bear. The blogger also speculates that *Shako* is a commentary on the Cold War. He writes that "the bear cannot comprehend why it cannot just be left alone, why these men hunt it, hurt it and attempt to destroy it." This is analogous to how many people felt during that time (Bacon par. 6). The graphic novel's meaning is open to interpretation, though. Despite this, Bacon makes an important point--rarely are comic books associated with such deep symbolism.

The blogger then examines the comic's illustrations. They are black and white which contributes to the despair portrayed by the authors. The artist occasionally uses splashes of red as well. Bacon writes that they are startling against the black and white background, reinforcing the comic book's violent themes (Bacon par. 7). His visual analysis is short and to the point. However, the blogger asserts that the novel is visually complex as well.

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The blogger ends by giving *Shako* a resounding recommendation (Bacon par. 1). He writes, "it is a really interesting read if a little bit of a sad reflection on how downright evil and just wrong humans can be compared to a beast in the natural world" (Bacon par. 7). This statement rejects the idea that comic books are not serious fiction; instead, the blogger believes that they can be used to explore sophisticated concepts.

Other times, the bloggers at Forbidden Planet looked at new titles to show that they also have worth. This can be seen in a review of *Department of the Peculiar's* issue two by Roi Hirst and Rob Wells. Blogger Richard Bruton explains that it is a "British take on powers – something to be embarrassed of, to hide, to ignore, the people here don't want these bloody crappy powers" (Bruton "Department" par. 2). It is about a government agency made entirely of mutants. The series focuses on one in particular, Viral Mal, who has the ability to induce heart attacks (Bruton "Department" pars. 3-4).

Bruton largely praises the comic book's illustrations. He writes that Well's black and white artwork is simple but effective (Bruton "Department" par. 9). The writing, though, is not as strong. The first issue was more of a satire of the typical superhero story, according to the blogger. This time though, it is "much like the sort of superhero type thing it's taking the piss out of." In addition, Bruton writes that the dialogue is not as "clever" and the less developed. However, the blogger blames the story for this. Bruton believes that it did not lend itself to such nuanced writing (Bruton "Department" par. 10).

This does not mean that the blogger dislikes this issue. He writes that "it's still good fun, well done work" (Bruton "Department" par. 10). Bruton's criticism of the comic is important,

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though, because it shows that he is not content to let issues with the characterization, dialogue, and story slide. He expects all literary elements to be developed. At the same time, though, the comic book can offer escape.

Another in-depth Forbidden Planet review looks at *Joe Kubert Presents #1*, an anthology of works by the famed comic artist and several of his contemporaries. Interestingly, blogger Joe Gordon's review is less clear cut than some of the others on the site, mixing the lowbrow with the more literary. For example, it is obvious right away that Kubert holds a certain amount of prestige within the comic book field. The blogger writes, "I couldn't resist picking it up. I mean, it's Joe Kubert for goodness sake, one of the finest artists the medium has seen, and a hugely influential figure, inspiring and tutoring so many others" (Gordon par. 3). This sets up readers to believe that the comic book is more literary. However, the blogger's comment also implies that it holds a certain amount of sentimentality.   He does not just respect Kubert; the artist and writer makes him feel nostalgic as well, a lowbrow characteristic.

Gordon continues switching between describing the collection's lowbrow and literary qualities throughout the review. For example, the blogger writes that the first comic by Kubert appears to be complex.   It is about two aliens, Katar and Shayero, who visit Earth to see why its inhabitants experience so many difficulties. The planet's citizens are starting to experiment with intergalactic travel. The aliens worry that they will only bring their problems into space. However, they change their minds after meeting the character Hawkman. He shows them that the human race has some value after all. The blogger admits that he never liked the superhero previously. However, he appreciated this particular story due in part to the author's exploration

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of themes like environmentalism (Gordon par. 6). This confession points to Kubert's writing ability and skills as an artist.

The next story is about a weathered sailor who adopts an orphaned boy. Again, it appears to be more complicated than the stereotypical comic book. The main character takes his new ward with him when he goes whaling. The blogger mostly examines the art, writing that it "has a very atmospheric monochrome artwork, rough, almost unfinished feeling." This perfectly complements the story's theme of desperation.   In addition, the blogger also hints at broader literary influences, comparing the plot to that of *Moby Dick* (Gordon par. 7).

The third installment is by another famed comic book artist, Brian Buniak. It is an outlier from the first two stories, offering more humor. The story follows a female detective who works with an ape to solve crimes. Gordon writes that it is short but covers a lot of territory. He states, "Buniak packs in the gags, both in words, and images, so it is impossible to stop smiling." In other words, the comic is geared at providing escape (Gordon par. 8).

This is stark contrast, though, to the last work in the anthology. The story by Sam Glanzman focusing on WW II soldiers has a much more serious feel. The blogger writes that it is "no gee-whiz, gung-ho, jingoistic adventure tale glamorizing combat." Instead, the writing is straight forward. This is very strategic on the author's part, according to the blogger. He does not want to overshadow the men's story with unnecessary details. The blogger writes, "anything more complex would be a distraction from the events that happened to these men" (Gordon par. 9). Again, Gordon sends the message that comic books can be literary.

The blogger concludes by giving the anthology a resounding recommendation. Gordon admits that nostalgia played a big role in his enjoyment of the collection. The works are still very complicated, though, rejecting the idea that comic books are childish. As the blogger writes, "nostalgia aside, I truly enjoyed taking in those styles once more" (Gordon par. 10).

Conclusion

Typically, genre fiction is dismissed as purely commercial with little if any cultural merit. Book bloggers, though, assert that this is not always the case. They argue that categories such as romance, fantasy, science fiction, and mystery fiction indeed display lowbrow characteristics. Over and over again, reviewers remarked on their love of certain characters or authors. As Nye states, such books clearly provided a certain amount of escape for readers. This is also conveyed by bloggers' boundless enthusiasm. Their writing displays an effervescence missing from traditional reviews, implying a certain amount of enjoyment. However, bloggers insist that genre fiction is more than lowbrow. They argue that authors no longer rely on stock characters and formulaic plots to hook readers, as was certainly the case at the beginning of the paperback revolution. These tropes are no longer genre authors' bread and butter, though, according to bloggers. This would imply that genre fiction has increased in cultural value. However, it does not fit neatly into scholars' descriptions of the middlebrow, either. Bloggers write that authors take time developing fictional elements such as plot, setting, characterization, and tone, but do not always "instruct." In fact, they celebrate the fact that genre offers pleasure. In our new age, "good reads" are just as important as aesthetics.

So where does genre fiction belong? A new system is needed for thinking about such cultural categories, as bloggers demonstrate. In a recent *New York Times* article, author Pankaj Mishra posits that categories like high, middle, and lowbrow are no longer relevant. The author states that "hatred of popular culture was...to define a generation of American intellectuals, and their claim to a superior sensibility" (Mishra and Mallon par. 10). The web, though, celebrates anyone and everyone's interests, putting them all on a level playing field. While this is true to a certain degree, the conversation around culture goes deeper. Mishra ignores the fact that the terms high, middle, and lowbrow are also limited in scope. They imply that all books fit into one of three categories, when culture is more of a spectrum. Some lowbrow works possess characteristics of the middlebrow and vice versa. In addition, these characteristics are developed to varying degrees. Book bloggers, though, draw attention to how narrowly defined these terms are. The online reviewers demonstrate that rarely can mystery, science fiction, romance, fantasy, and young adult fiction, children's literature, and comic books be so neatly categorized anymore. While genre fiction is difficult to categorize, one thing is clear—it can no longer be dismissed purely as trash.

Chapter 3

Book Blogs and Gender: A New Discourse for Reviewing

Recent research by the non-profit VIDA: Women in Literary Arts reveals that print-based

book reviewing is skewed toward men. Historically, men have made up the majority of

reviewers. These statistics have improved in recent years as VIDA sheds light on the issue.

More and more publications are hiring women to review as a result. However, larger social

issues are at the root of the gender divide among reviewers. Namely, society views how men

read differently than how women read. Historically, women are thought to read for escape. In

addition, female readers are believed to use books solely for self-reflection. Thus, they are

excluded from reviewing; women are thought to lack the aptitude necessary for the serious

analysis of books' fictional elements. This means that simply including more female reviewers

is not enough to correct the gender divide. Reviewers also need to confront stereotypes about

women's reading. Book bloggers are doing this to a certain extent. Women flocked to the

internet because they are excluded from mainstream publications. Bloggers use language which

is stereotypically thought of as female, challenging the stereotypically male language of

mainstream publications. Book bloggers also structure reviews to invite discussion. In

mainstream publications, the flow of information only goes on way, another trait often believed

to be male. Finally, book bloggers point out positive and negative portrayals of female

characters in books, topics which are often ignored by mainstream publications. By doing so,

these reviewers are helping to write a completely new discourse for writing about

books, creating a space where everyone, not just men, can participate.

Gender and Reading

Feminist theorists argue that gender is a social construction, something that people "do."

Simone de Beauvoir asserts in *The Second Sex* that "One is not born, but rather becomes,

woman" (262). Similarly, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* writes, "women itself is a term in

process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (33).

These scholars go on to argue that people are taught how to perform gender from an early age.

It is prescribed in a variety of ways, from how people dress to how they speak to how they move.

To support this point, feminist scholar Judith Lorber cites a culture in Africa where men and

women are expected to walk differently. Men stand up straight so that they can easily detect

threats. Women, on the other hand, watch where they walk, slightly slouched, at all times.

People in this culture do not walk either way naturally, according to Lorber. Rather, it is a

learned behavior, signaling masculinity or femininity (Lorber 58). She concludes that

performing gender serves a couple of important functions in society. First, it assists with the

division of labor. Lorber states that women are associated with the domestic while men

"dominate the positions of authority and leadership in government, the military, and the law."

Second, it helps to reinforce power structures within society; actions which are considered to be

male are often accorded more importance (Lorber 61).

The stratification system that feminist scholars describe extends into all areas of life, including reading. Women are largely associated with consuming books for escape and personal reflection while men are thought to read for information. This idea is evident in most studies of reader reception, such as David Bleich's "Gender Interests in Reading and Language." The author, a professor at Indiana State University, studied his students' responses to classic authors such as Herman Melville and Emily Bronte (Bleich 239). He found that female students responded very differently to texts than male students. The author claims that "women enter the world of the novel, take it as something 'there' for that purpose; men see the novel as a result of someone's action and construe its meaning or logic in those terms" (Bleich 239). For example, the author describes several students' reactions to *Wuthering Heights*. One named Mr. C read a biography of Emily Bronte beforehand because he thought that it would help him interpret the novel (Bleich 240). By contrast, a student named Ms. B. personally connected with Isabella (Bleich 245). This does not mean that men and women do not borrow modes of interpretation from each other, according to the author. However, he argues that these are their primary methods.

Anne Berggren reiterates the idea that women mainly use books to reflect on their lives in her study "Reading like a Woman." She interviewed a handful of women about their reading habits. The author found three major trends among their responses. First, Berggren argues that women utilize books as blueprints for how to act. She cites a participant in her study named Kim who enjoyed *Little Women* because Jo March does not allow social expectations to prevent her from becoming a writer (Berggren 175). Kim applied these ideas to her life when she became a

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lawyer. Berggren also claims that women use books to learn about the world. At first, it seems like she is arguing that female readers utilize books for analytical reasons as well.   However, it quickly becomes clear that Berggren's definition of education is actually narrower.   The author refers to a woman named Sylvia who, as a child, used books to learn about how people interact with each other. For example, she read *Cheaper by the Dozen* to see how families other than her own operated. Finally, Berggren claims that women use reading to better understand their "life trajectories" (179). She refers to a journalist named Nancy who read Sigrid Undset's book *Kristin Lavransdatter* about a pregnant woman before she gave birth herself (Berggren 179). Not once does the author suggest that women read books for information or analyze them critically.

The concept that women's reading is less serious is reiterated in most studies of book clubs which are generally assumed to be comprised of women. For example, scholar Linsey Howie studied several book clubs sponsored by Australia's Council of Adult Education to see how they discussed books.   The author found that groups largely promoted "self-awareness" among members (Howie 140).   They did this in a couple of ways. According to Howie, members felt encouraged to make interpersonal connections with each other (146). This was clear when they used words like "nurturing," "supportive," and "safe" to describe their groups. Howie goes on to explain that participants also connected with the books which they read (Howie 144). For example, the author refers to a woman named Ann whose group once read a book about a tumultuous marriage. She told the interviewer that "for some reason that connected with us all, because we were all in relationships, whether daughters or sisters, got husbands or

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boyfriends or whatever" (Howie 145).   Not once, though, does Howie suggest that members of

the reading groups cast a critical eye on novels.

The same idea can be found in Elizabeth Long's *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*. The study, published in 2003 examines reading groups in Texas. Again, the author reinforces the idea that women who made up the majority of participants in her study largely read for relaxation and self-reflection. Long states that members often read classics or educational titles. The groups which she studied discussed "Contemporary 'serious' fiction and nonfiction (such as biographies, history, science, and philosophy) and the classics" (Long 120). However, book clubs used them as jumping off points for self-reflection (Long 146). One group's discussion of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* exemplified this. Members liked that the heroine took control over her sexuality. Long writes that they "were intrigued with her idea that women might want a Zipless Fuck (sex without involvement) and they admired her search for 'selfhood'" (155). Not once, though, did participants in the book club comment on the title's fictional elements. In addition, Long notes that members often joined book clubs to socialize, not because they especially like reading. Describing the groups' demographics, she explains that many participants were bored house-wives who had no other way to meet people. While this might be true, it reinforces the idea that women lack the capacity to analyze books seriously.

Studies such as Rona Kaufman's "'That, My Dear, is Called Reading: Oprah's Book Club and the Construction of a Readership" also support the idea that women's reading is emotional. While millions of readers participated in the televised reading group, it was largely considered female because of the association with the talk show host. Launched in the late

1990s, Oprah selected a title every few months to discuss on air. She invited a group of readers to discuss each book, and they were even joined by the authors. Members read a mixture of classics and contemporary authors such as Toni Morrison who was a frequent guest. Participants even used very academic language at times to discuss books. This gave the club a feeling of cultural authority. However, as Kaufman writes, Oprah largely picked titles which she thought would be "transformative." To support this point, she cites several letters from viewers, including one by a woman who stated that she began hugging her daughter more after reading one of the host's selections (Kaufman "My Dear" 241-4). The books forced readers to reflect on their lives, a topic which often popped up during discussions. As a result, the club never lost its reputation as a place where women could connect with each other and talks about their lives, thereby furthering negative stereotypes about women and reading.

The social construction of women's reading also contributes to the division of labor, as Lorber states. Because their reading is considered frivolous, women are often excluded from jobs which involve the serious analysis of books, such as reviewing. This issue recently came to light with the help of VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, a non-profit organization that promotes "critical attention to contemporary women's writing as well as further transparency around gender equality issues in contemporary literary culture" ("About Vida" par. 1). Founder Cate Marvin teamed up with a couple of her friends to investigate reviewing's gender disparity ("About Vida" par. 1). Every year, they look at over a hundred papers, magazines, literary journals, and anthologies to see how many female reviewers are included. The organization then releases a report detailing their gender breakdown ("About Vida" par. 4). Its most recent

findings revealed that the number of female reviewers is on the rise. However, the percentage of female reviewers at major publications varies. For example, *The New York Times Book Review* has made significant progress in recent years ("The 2014 VIDA Count" par. 12). Their number of female reviewers in 2015 was almost equal to that of men ("New York Times"). However, a little over a third of reviews in the *Nation* were by women ("The Nation"). This demonstrates that while statistics are improving, there still remains a lot of work to be done before gender parity is achieved.

<div align="center">The Internet as Refuge</div>

The web, however, provides a safe haven for women to a certain degree. Some scholars like Sherry Turkle argue that the internet encourages people to "transcend" the boundaries of gender. In "Construction and Reconstruction of Self in Virtual Reality: Playing in the MUDS," she looks at how players of online role playing games craft unique identities. They are usually text based. As a result, players can become whomever they want. As Turkle writes, "you can present yourself as a "character," in which you can be anonymous, in which you can play a role as close or as far away from your "real self" as you choose" (Turkle par. 7). One way that gamers do this is through "gender swapping."   Men can play as women and vice versa (Turkle par. 38). This does not mean that the internet is completely neutral, though. Players posing as women often reported experiencing sexist behavior. Turkle states that "female characters are besieged with attention, sexual advances, and unrequested offers of assistance which imply that women can't do things by themselves" (par. 43). Text based games seem ancient by today's

standards. However, Turkle was groundbreaking because she was one of the first to examine the subversive potential of the web in regards to gender.

Other scholars argue that the web is a place where women can simply express themselves more freely because they are not constrained by the same gender roles as within real life. For example, communications scholar Deborah Bowen investigates how this occurs within blogging. She writes that women are excluded from public forms of discourse. However, Bowen states, "The online autobiography gives a woman the freedom to try out some or all of her voices, to publish ideas and opinions solely for the pleasure of recording and sharing experiences" (311). This does not mean that women's online speech is not regulated. In fact, female users are the subject of much gender-based harassment. A Pew Research Center study revealed that 72.5 of the people who report online harassment are women (Hess par. 8).   This just includes the cases that are reported. However, Bowen states that the web gives women a certain amount of control which they lack in real life. Namely, bloggers select the topics which they cover. To support this point, she gives the example of a blogger named Fairybytch who wrote about the intimate details of her love life on her blog. She would not have been able to do that in any other forum, according to the author (Bowen 316). In addition, bloggers can choose who gets to comment on their posts, if at all. As Bowen writes, "The author controls the two-way communication here. She opens the dialogue" (317). Again, this type of control is often lacking in real life.

The web's subversive potential regarding gender can be seen in a recent *New Yorker* article by Rebecca Mead. She describes how highly successful "chick lit" author Jennifer Weiner uses the internet to challenge publishers and book sellers. She has sold over four million

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books and appears frequently on *The New York Times* best seller list. However, she has never

been reviewed by the paper because her books are about women and prominently feature

romance (Mead par. 8). To combat this bias, Weiner uses social media, especially her blog, to

point out negative aspects of the publishing industry.   One way that she does this is by

promoting female authors and criticizing mainstream reviewers when they do not (Mead par.

10). Weiner also utilizes social media to highlight the gendered way by which publishers treat

women's fiction. Namely, they put "dreamy" covers on books by female writers, perpetuating

the idea that women's reading is less serious (Mead par. 15).   Mead concludes by quoting the

author as saying, "'I want books like mine visible and valued, if not loved, by a critical

establishment that's still too rooted in sexist double standards, still too swift to dismiss women's

work as small, trivial, unimpressive, and unimportant'" (qtd. in Mead par. 39). This might not

have been possible without recent technological advances.

<div align="center">The Personal as Proof</div>

The web also provides a space where women can safely review books. While they make

up a significant number of bloggers, simply including more women is not enough to dismantle

the field's gendered nature. If bloggers are going to do this, they must also challenge reviews'

language.   According to communications scholar Cheris Kramarae, men hold more power

within society. As a result, they set the parameters for what is considered to be acceptable

speech. Kramarae writes that "groups that are on top of the social hierarchy determine to a great

extent the dominant communication system of society" (1). Communications scholars Karen

Foss and Sonja Foss reiterate this sentiment in *Women Speaking*. They write that men are simply

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valued more as communicators than women (Foss and Foss 10). This concept also applies to

book reviewing. Because men dominate reviewing, its language is stereotypically male. For

example, as mentioned previously, reviews often use a neutral tone when describing books. This

method of communication is meant to convey a sense of objectivity, a characteristic often

associated with men (Kramarae 26).   Women's speech, on the other hand, is considered to be

personal and emotive, a phenomenon which can be observed in studies of books clubs.

However, Kramarae argues that it can also have a subversive quality. The author states,

"Women in the movement now consciously use the personal as proof, in an attempt to correct a

situation in which women and their experiences have been slighted" (Kramarae 27). In other

words, by talking about their lives, women demand that their experiences be recognized by the

rest of the world.

Bloggers engage in a similar practice of resistance. Almost all have some kind of

biography or "About Me" section. Bloggers use these spaces to write about their lives in a way

that forces readers to confront how reviews are gendered.   An example of this is the "About Me"

page for the mystery blogger Pattinase. At first glance, it is unclear whether the blogger is a man

or a woman. Her online handle is gender neutral; so is her "About Me" section. Pattinase

mentions that she is a writer who also works in education. In addition, the blogger lists some of

her favorite books, movies, and musicians. Her interests could belong to either a man or woman.

However, Pattinase specifically lists her gender as female. She could have easily have left this

out of her "About Me" section. By including her gender in the description of herself, though,

Pattinase makes it an important part of her identity, and, by default, her reviews. She refuses to

let her gender be erased

Gender	Female
Industry	Education
Occupation	writer
Location	Detroit, MI, United States
Introduction	Writer of short stories.
Interests	family, movies, books, politics, culture
Favorite Movies	Bringing Up Baby, Casablanca, Chinatown, Rear Window, The Graduate, All the President's Men, The Godfather, The Beat that My Heart Skipped, Rififi
Favorite Music	Music of Nina Simone, Charlie Haden, T. Monk, Rachmaninoff, The Beatles, Stephan Grappelli, Feist, Brubeck, Lucinda Williams, Leonard Cohen.
Favorite Books	Daniel Woodrell, Charles Willeford, James Sallis, Megan Abbott, Ken Bruen, Al Guthrie, Ross MacDonald, Margaret Millar, Sandra Scoppettone, Patricia Highsmith Collected Stories of Andre Dubus, Revolutionary Road

Fig. 1. Abbott, Patricia. "About Me." Digital image. *Pattinase*. Pattinase, n.d. Web. 13 Sept. 2016. <https://www.blogger.com/profile/02916037185235335846>.

Blogger April at Good Books & Good Wine takes a very different approach to her

"About" section, writing several paragraphs about her life. She lists her credentials for

reviewing books. April alludes to the fact that she works in a library (April "About" par. 6). The

blogger also elaborates on her love of books, stating, "I own an e-reader and am enamored with it. Speaking of owning things, I am at over 1,000 books, yet still cannot stop collecting. I check my Goodreads more than I check my Facebook" (April "About" par. 5). However, April spends just as much if not more time describing other aspects of her life, most of which are stereotypically female. She writes that she loves the color pink and is waiting for her boyfriend to propose to her. April even writes, "I should let the cat out of the bag and state that I am a feminist, meaning that I think women, men and transgendered should have equality" (April "About" par. 3). Energetic and opinionated, her "About" section could not be any more different from Pattinase's. However, it serves a similar purpose. It forces readers to confront the idea that reviewing is a male activity. Not only is April a woman, she is unabashedly so. However, this does prevent her from being able to accurately analyze books. Readers can see that she is just as knowledgeable about books as a male reviewer.
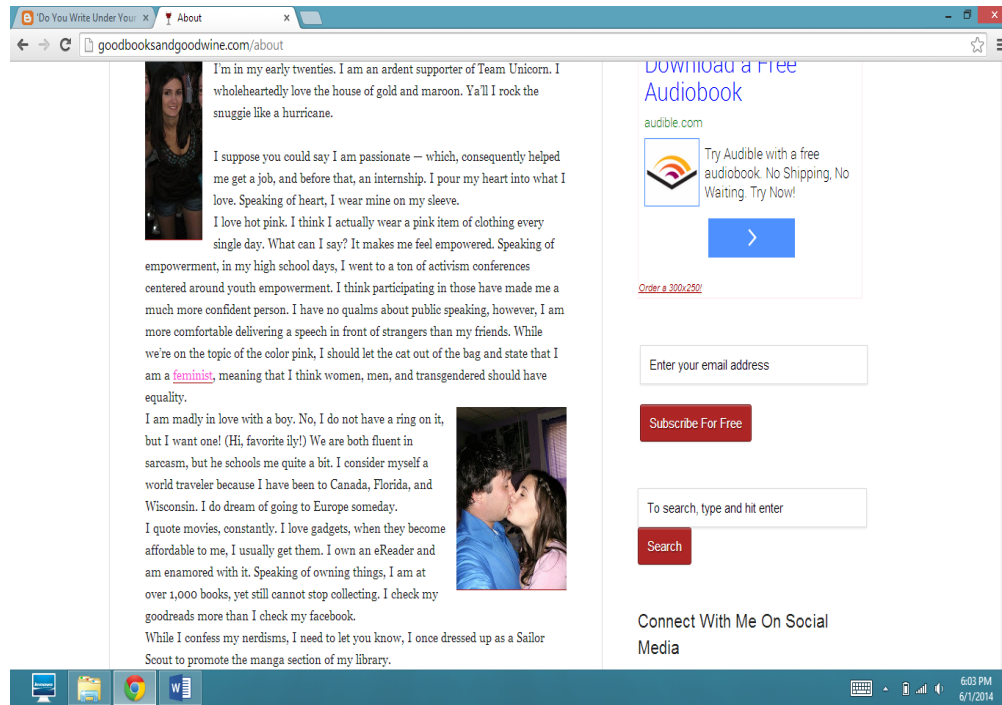
Fig. 2. April. "Screenshot of the Good Books & Good Wine 'About' page." *Good Books & Good Wine*, n.d. Web. 1 June 2014. <http://goodbooksandgoodwine.com/about>.

There's a Book blogger Danielle Smith, also known as the 1st Daughter, takes this strategy a step further. She writes in detail about her life in her "About" section, stating that she works for a publishing company. The blogger also mentions that she has two kids, affectionately referred to as "Little Bug" and "Turkey Bird" (Smith "About" par 3). This by itself is significant; the blogger forces readers to accept the fact that not only is she a woman but also a mother. Smith does not stop there, though, but goes on to incorporate her children's opinions about books into reviews. A good example is a post examining *Just Like My Papa* by Toni Buzzeo. It is about a lion playing with his son on the savanna (Smith "Papa" par. 2). The blogger writes that children can relate easily to the story. To support this point, she includes a quote from her son saying, "I do think it would be lots of fun to roar like Kito and his Papa do in

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the story though, maybe I'll even scare my mom and sister doing it a few times" (Smith "Papa"

par. 4). By writing about her children's lives, Smith also challenges the gendered nature of

reviews. It is easy to ignore when reviews are written in a neutral, objective tone. By

interjecting her personal experiences, though, the blogger demands to be recognized as a

reviewer and a woman. In fact, this might even enhance Smith's reviews. The inclusion of her

children's voices allows people to see that her books have been kid tested and mother approved.

Fig. 3. Smith, Danielle. "Screenshot of the There's a Book 'About/Contact Us' Page." *There's a Book,* n.d. Web. 13 April 2015. < http://www.theresabook.com/about-contactus>.

<div align="center">Dialogue as a Subversive Strategy</div>

Bloggers also subvert traditional male reviews by challenging their structure.

Mainstream reviews are limited to the opinions of a handful of people. As literary scholar

Richard Ohmann writes that "The elite…largely determined which books would be permanently

valued, and well as what ideas were kept alive, circulated, discussed" (383). The elite, though, has historically consisted of men. However, conversation is a popular feminist strategy for conducting research. Researchers often interview their subjects; they might even ask for assistance in interpreting data (Reinharz 18-181). This type of dialogue serves a couple of important functions, according to feminist scholar Shulamit Reinharz. First, it captures the viewpoints of different people, including those who have typically been ignored by society—namely, women (Reinharz 18). In addition, conversation highlights the constructed nature of knowledge. Typical methods assume that the researcher knows everything. Dialogue, though, acknowledges that the creation of knowledge is an ongoing process relying on a variety of viewpoints (Reinharz 230). Similarly, Foss and Foss emphasize the importance of collaboration within communication studies. They assert that "To focus on one individual as the creator of a text often is inaccurate in that it ignores the contributions of those around the communicator" (12). Again, rarely is a text produced by just one person.

This is an idea shared by book bloggers who encourage conversation and collaboration among each other. The primary way that they do this is by participating in tours. Tours are clearly a marketing strategy meant to create buzz, especially for authors who do not have a lot of clout within publishing. As mentioned previously, tours typically last a couple of weeks and involve participants reviewing the same title on different days. Blogger posts links to each other's reviews so that readers can easily follow the tour from post to post. Tours also often include some kind of giveaway like a galley copy of a book as extra incentive to follow the tour. However, tours also serve a couple of other important functions. First and foremost, they

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provide readers with different perspectives on the same title, something that never happens in major publications. Rarely do mainstream reviewers acknowledge the viewpoints of others. If major publications do, it is to criticize them. In addition, conversation fosters community among authors and readers. This is important for lesser-known writers, especially women who are often ignored by mainstream publishers. According to Vida, the gender divide does not stop at reviewers; male authors also receive the most reviews. In 2014, women only made up forty percent of authors reviewed in *Harpers*, one of the nation's leading literary journals ("The 2015 VIDA Count" par. 11). The *Times Literary Supplement* was even worse. Only thirty percent of authors reviewed were women ("The 2015 VIDA Count" par. 15). Tours, though, creates a sense of authority in the absence of more official credentials. Readers might be more likely to pick up new authors' titles as a result.

A tour of *Let the Sky Fall* by Shannon Messenger is a good example of the importance of conversation among reviewers. The book is about a boy named Vane Weston who gets caught in a category five tornado.   It kills his parents but Vane somehow survives (Erica par. 4). He is saved by Audra, a sylph who tries to help him remember his past (Erica par. 6).

One blogger on the tour, Erica at the Book Cellar, offers a short analysis of the book. She begins by investigating the point of view. It is told from both Vane and Audra's perspectives. Juggling two viewpoints might be hard for some authors but Messenger obviously took great care in developing them. Book Cellar writes that "Vane was funny and sarcastic while Audra reminded me a bit more of myself and was a bit more on the serious side" (Erica par. 9). The blogger goes on to state that Messenger's writing is well developed. The pacing is

slow which added to the plot. According to Book Cellar, "It was good and it was the kind of book you kind of just savored as you read along." At times, though, it was a problem for the blogger who felt less of a sense of urgency. However, she states that the final third of the storyline was quicker and contained several twists, giving the book some much needed momentum (Erica par. 10). Finally, the blogger writes that she likes Messenger's use of sylphs. The magical creatures "really don't get a lot of attention in books" (Erica par. 11). However, the author put an interesting spin on the mythological creatures. Erica concludes that the book "was a great read" giving out four out of five stars (Erica par. 12).

Another stop on the tour offers a different perspective. Similar to the Book Cellar, blogger KatieB at Mundie Moms comments on her love of the characters, the story, and mythology. However, she chooses to go into much more detail about different elements. For example, she spends greater space commenting on the "swoon worthy" romance between Vane and Audra (KatieB par. 12). She writes, "'Their story is one heck of a complicated, mesmerizing tangled mess of love, protectiveness, trust, learning to let go, and learning to take that plunge into the unknown." Audra resists Vane's advances which only makes him try harder to earn her affection. Together, though, they work to defeat the wind creatures, deepening their relationship (KatieB par. 11). Interestingly, the blogger provides a different perspective on the novel's pacing as well. While the Book Cellar thought that the story was slow, KatieB calls it "a fun, engaging, fast paced read" (KatieB par. 8). These kinds of perspectives would have been missing if the tour was limited to one reviewer. By drawing on the perspectives of a variety of people, though, readers get a greater sense of the novel.

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Other tours take different approaches to reviewing books. For example, some primarily feature interviews with authors. This type of tour spends less time directly analyzing titles. However, it is still important, offering insight into books' meanings. One example is a tour for *What's Left of Me* by Kat Zhang, the first book in the Hybrid Chronicles. It is about a society where everyone is born with two souls. One is supposed to disappear after a period of time (Thea "What's Left" par. 5). However, this does not happen with Eva and Addie. The former is eventually forced into hiding because "hybrids" are an anomaly. However, Eva longs for the day when she can move the body that she shares with Addie again (Thea "What's Left" par. 6).

The tour covered ten blogs. Book Smugglers' post focuses much more on the author's process for writing the novel. Blogger Thea begins by asking Zhang what some of her inspirations for the book were (Thea "A Chat with Kat" par. 3). Zhang responds "the idea for the story actually came from my thinking about the idea of a person's inner monologue, that 'little voice in the back of your head' that people sometimes call a conscience, or the 'angel/demon on your shoulder dynamic' or what have you" (qtd. in Thea "A Chat with Kat" par. 4). The blogger continues by asking how Zhang came up with the setting (Thea "A Chat with Kat" par. 10). Interestingly, the author states that she did not reference other novels when creating the setting. Instead, she drew a lot of inspiration from real life, events that focused on "The 'othering of groups" (qtd. in Thea "A Chat with Kat" par. 11). At the same time, Zhang's interview provides some insight into how she developed literary elements. This will only broaden readers' understanding of the novel.

Another stop on the tour, Me, My Shelf, and I, takes a very different approach to talking with the author. Instead of focusing on the book, blogger Amber poses questions about the author's personal life. For example, she asks "Heels or Flats"? The author answers, "Wedge heels, haha. I like to have a little height in my shoes, but I'm a bit of a klutz at times (currently the only person I know who falls going *up* stairs on any regular basis), so thin heels are a no-go" (qtd. in Amber par. 2). The blogger continues by asking several other seeming unrelated questions such as "Root Beer or Orange Soda," "Summer or Fall," and "Forks or Spoons" (Amber pars. 3-10). The only time she comes close to touching on something literary is when she asks "Peeta or Gale," a reference to the popular Hunger Games series. Zhang answers, "Oh, the question of the ages, right?:P Though, to be honest, I was never terribly invested in the whole debate! I'm Team Katniss all the way!" (Amber par. 5). Her responses, while whimsical, serve an important purpose—they paint Zhang as a real person, not just an author. Readers might be more likely to pick up a book from a relatively unknown author if she seems accessible.

Other tours are obviously geared toward promotion. They delve less into the book's specifics or the author's writing process, instead taking a more whimsical approach. Even still, these tours provide new perspectives on titles which might not be covered by other reviewers or even other bloggers. An example of this is Lenore Appelhans' *Level 2*. The book is about a teenager named Felicia Ward who spends much of her life traveling the world. She leads a troubled life, though, so her father sends her to a boarding school. Right before her eighteenth birthday, she dies and goes to Level 2, a kind of purgatory. Felicia spends most of her time there in a pod, thinking about her life on earth, especially her old boyfriend, Neal. One day, though,

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her routine is interrupted by a boy that she knew on earth named Julian. He recruits her to help overthrow the angels preventing them from entering heaven.

The tour encompasses eleven blogs, both in the United States and abroad because the author lives in the United Kingdom. The very first stop on the tour, Serendipity Reviews, is a post by the author. Interestingly, she does not once attempt to summarize her book. Instead, Appelhans explains how she got started as a writer. She states that she actually started blogging herself in 2008. Just a couple years later when the author began writing her book, she had read more than 300 young adult titles (Appelhans *Serendipity* par. 2). Blogging informed her writing and vice versa. The author states, "Reading so many novels gave me an excellent education in what works (and doesn't) in terms of crafting a narrative (pacing, plotting, characterization, etc)" (Appelhans *Serendipity* par. 3). Appelhans concludes by expressing her appreciation for bloggers. She writes that they have provided her with a number of contacts in the book world. More generally, though, bloggers have become her friends, supporting her through the process of publishing her first novel (Appelhans *Serendipity* par. 4-6). This is significant because it demonstrates the dialogic nature of blogging. Reviewing is not a one-way street like in mainstream publications. Instead, the author directly addresses her audience, deepening their sense of community.

Book Smugglers, another stop on the tour, also allows the author to write a post. This time, though, she explains some of the influences on her writing. They cover a variety of formats. For example, the author writes that she loves dystopian literature. This prompted her to ask, "What would a dystopian *afterlife* look like?" (Appelhans *Book Smugglers* par. 4).

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However, Appelhans states she drew more from popular culture than anything else. Some of Appelhans' influences are less obvious, though. For example, she writes that the song "'Beekeeper" by Tori Amos played an important part of her writing process. The musician once commented in an interview that bees symbolize the infinite. They in turn became a recurring them in the book (Appelhans *Book Smugglers* par. 16). The Book Smugglers post is interesting because it provides insight into the process of writing a novel. A myriad of factors can influence a book's creation. Very rarely do authors, especially those who are lesser known like Appelhans, get to explain this process. However, she traces a very clear lineage from a handful of movies, books and songs to her novel. This will only expand how readers interpret the novel.

Another stop on the tour, Sarah at Novel Novice, takes a more creative approach to examining *Level 2*. The blogger imagines an interview with one of the characters from the novel, Felicia's father, Eliot. Sarah does not say much about the character directly. However, his responses to the blogger's "questions" reveal a free spirit. He talks about experimenting with various musical styles and traveling across the world (Sara pars. 3-4). His answers also demonstrate a deep love for his daughter. This is clear when the blogger "asks" Eliot if he has a favorite memory of Felecia (Sara par. 12). He responds, **"**Evie, Felicia's mother, never wanted to have children, so I resigned myself to never getting to be a dad. But then, Felicia came into our lives and I remember the first time I cradled her to my chest. It was the most magical moment of my life" (Sara par. 13). Eliot plays a minor role in the novel, according to the blogger (Sara par. 2). However, the blogger's interview adds depth to an otherwise ambiguous person. A mainstream review might not take the time to explore such a secondary character and

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in such a creative format. This is only possible in a book blog. In addition, other reviewers might offer a different interpretation of Eliot.

Several stops on the tour, though, were simply fun. One blogger, Overflowing Libraries, offered instructions for painting Level 2 inspired nails (see fig. 4). Dark Readers, another blogger, showed pictures from the book's release party in England. The blogger describes how the publishers Usborne chose the venue for the event. It was held at the Ice Tank in Convent Garden because it looks similar to Appelhans' description of Level 20—"white and minimal" ("BEHIND THE SCENES" par. 4). Finally, blogger Sophistikatied features a short YouTube video going behind the scenes of the photoshoot for the book's cover. It also has a link to an excerpt from the book. Posts like these are obviously intended to create buzz around titles. However, they are still significant to understanding the novel. Some posts like the video actually offer insight into its creation. More importantly, though, these tours show that reading can be fun, creating space for a greater variety of readers.

Fig. 4. Kirsty. "Create Your Level 2 Nails." Digital image. *The Overflowing Library*. The Overflowing Library, 8 Jan. 2013. Web. 13 Sept. 2016. <http://www.overflowinglibrary.com/2013/01/blog-tour-level-2-by-lenore-applehans.html>.

Gender and Genre

Finally, the book world as a whole is male, even though women reportedly make up the majority of readers, consuming more novels, utilizing libraries, and participating in books clubs (Adler par. 1). Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. Namely, though, male authors receive the most recognition by cultural authorities. For example, they are the recipients of more literary awards. Only four women have won the Nobel Prize for Literature since it was created in 1901 ("Facts on the Noble Prize" par. 16). In addition, male and female characters are held to different standards, a fact which can be seen in the recent *Guardian* article "Sexism in publishing: 'My novel wasn't the problem, it was me, Catherine.'" It describes author Catherine Nichols' quest to get published. She sent inquiries to fifty publishers using her real name and a male pseudonym (Flood "Sexism" par. 3). When the author used her real name, publishers told

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that she should make her heroine more "plucky." In other words, the female protagonist should adhere to stereotypically gendered behavior. Nicholls received no such feedback, though, when she used her male pseudonym. Publishers instead simply called her novel "well-constructed" and "exciting," appreciating her work on its literary merit alone (Flood "Sexism" par. 4).

This gender divide extends into genre fiction as well**;** most categories are thought of as male. The fantasy genre is largely believed to be for men, for example. As mentioned previously, female authors are treated with less regard than their male counterparts. There are just as many women fantasy authors as men. However, the latter receives the most recognition. The Hugo awards, distributed every year to the best fantasy and science fiction authors, are a prime example of this phenomenon. Since its inception in 1953, the award has largely been distributed to male authors. Anne McCaffrey, the first woman to receive a Hugo, was only recognized fifteen years after the award's inception (Heer "Science Fiction's White Boys" par. 2). As a result, some female fantasy authors resort to using male pseudonyms to make their way into the field (Heer "Science Fiction's White Boys" par. 12). Either that or they use gender neutral names. Children's author J.K. Rowling is a famous example of this phenomenon. She shortened her name from Joanna because she thought that it would appeal to a both boys and girls, selling more books. Unfortunately, using a pseudonym seems to be one of the few ways for women to succeed in the fantasy genre.

In addition, female characters within fantasy are treated less seriously. According to Mendlesohn and James, "For many people, fantasy can be identified by its cover art. A dragon or wizard is usually a clue; but so is a half-naked barbarian (male or female) wielding a sword"

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(Mendlesohn and James 113). This speaks to how characters, especially women, are sexualized within the genre. They are objects of desire, not fully formed characters. On the other end of the spectrum, female characters are depicted as maternal figures, celebrated solely for their ability to have children. Women's magic within fantasy is even gendered. Female characters are either evil or benign white witches. In addition, if a woman uses her power for good, it is always in the service of others. Clute and Grant write, "unless she is perceived as evil, a woman uses her powers for the good of others either to help her community or too provide backup strength to the hero" (394). It never advances her own storylines. Unfortunately, there is not much middle ground in how women are portrayed within fantasy. Female characters must fit into one of two roles—angels or whore, good or evil.

Interestingly, genre scholars John Clute and John Grant write that fantasy fares slightly better than others regarding its treatment of women. They assert that "Fantasy as a genre is generally perceived as more hospitable to women" (Clute and Grant 393). The fantastic nature of the writing style allows for a certain amount of experimentation (Clute and Grant 393). Fantasy authors often model their worlds on societies which have existed in the past. Some use matriarchal societies as the inspiration such as the Celtics who worshipped goddesses (Clute and Grant 394). As a result, fantasy novels are not as restricted in their gender roles. In addition, female characters demonstrate a little more agency because they possess battle skills and magical powers (Clute and Grant 394). In some novels, gender can even be discarded completely. Sometimes characters shapeshift between male and female at will (Clute and Grant 395). This

kind of experimentation allows fantasy authors to play with the strict roles imposed on women

by the genre.

Despite this seeming progress, the gender divide persists. A brouhaha over the SFWA's

Winter 2013 issue is a prime example of the ongoing controversy. The cover sparked a firestorm

because it featured a woman wearing a chainmail bikini. It was intended to communicate

empowerment--she is depicted killing a giant. However, her physique is the obvious focus of the

cover, her chain mail barely covering her heaving bosom. The cover prompted a wide array of

comments from the fantasy community. Many reiterated Clute and Grant like author Ann

Aguirre who stated "If this means I don't get into anthos [anthologies] or invited to parties, I

don't give a fuck. I care more about doing the right thing, about speaking out, so maybe other

women who have had these experiences will do the same" (Flood "Science Fiction" par. 8).

However, others questioned the role of feminism within the genre. SFWA columnists Barry

Malzberg and Mike Resnick "'If they get away with censoring that, can you imagine what comes

next? I'm pretty sure Joe Stalin could imagine it … Even Chairman Mao could imagine it'" (qtd.

in Flood "Science Fiction" par. 4). There was no apparent resolution to the debacle; however,

the magazine's editor, Jean Rabe, quickly resigned (Flood "Science Fiction" par. 13). While the

controversy over the cover might seem insignificant, it is indicative of a larger struggle going on

within fantasy. Women are still fighting to have their works recognized within the genre.

The gender divide does not end with fantasy, though. It is also prevalent in science

fiction. According to James and Mendlesohn "Traditionally, sf has been considered a

predominantly masculine field which, through its focus on science and technology, 'naturally'

excludes women and by implication, considerations of gender" (241). This is in large part due to how female characters are treated within the genre. Like in fantasy, they are often limited to a couple of roles. Science fiction scholar Eric Rabkin stated that the "love struck heroine" is a common trope within science fiction. Even if a woman is portrayed as something other than a wife or mother, she is usually willing to sacrifice everything for the protagonist's affection (Rabkin 17). Other times, women within the genre are portrayed purely as sex objects (Rabkin 51). Nowhere is either of these points more clear than in the *Science Fiction Handbook for Readers and Writers* by George Elrick. The author describes how to develop a variety of elements, including female characters. He states, "In today's science fiction, though beautiful and feminine, she's about as helpless as a resourceful undercover agent. Her antecedents were woodenly platonic, but she has a normal quota of hormones coursing through her lovely veins, and responds to their urgings without hesitation or embarrassment" (Elrick 18). In other words, women are little more than pretty faces meant to serve male characters. While this guide is dated—it was published in the 1970s—female characters within the genre are held to gendered stereotypes.

Despite this, Rabkin writes that science fiction authors are trying to change how women are portrayed. This movement began in the 1960s with the rise of feminism. Many science fiction authors during this time asserted that women deserved greater representation (James and Mendlesohn 246). Science fiction authors also started envisioning more creative roles for female characters "freed from restrictive social conventions" (21). For example, Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* published in 1969 was groundbreaking because it removed gender from the

equation completely; all of the characters are androgynous (James and Mendlesohn 248). In addition, there was a rise in dystopian fiction in the 1980s. Science fiction authors started using the subgenre to comment on gender roles in modern society. For example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a glimpse into a future where women are valued solely for their ability to reproduce. However, Rabkin concludes that "an honest historian of science fiction must recognize that most science fiction still winds up depicting woman exploited" (Rabkin 14). This can be seen looking at the most recent round of Hugo Awards. Men still constituted eighty percent of last year's nominees, demonstrating that women still live on the margins of science fiction (Heer "Science Fiction's White Boys" par. 14).

Mystery is also a male genre. Again, it is not that there is a lack of female authors. Mystery scholar Peter Messent writes, "For there is, indeed, a long history of women crime writers, stretching back to gothic and sensation fiction of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." He gives the example of Agatha Christie, one of the most well-known authors within the genre (Messent 89). However, male authors often receive the most recognition, garnering the most awards. This started to change somewhat in the mid-eighties as female crime writers called for greater recognition. For example, author Sara Paretsky gave a speech at Hunter College during this time which helped to raise awareness about their plight (Fister par. 5). Around this same time, the organization Sisters in Crime emerged. It is designed to "Promote the ongoing advancement, recognition and professional development of women crime writers" ("Strategic Plan" par. 5). Similar to Vida, the organization counts how many female mystery authors are given reviews every year. Since the 1980s, women have made significant strides

within the genre. However, Sisters in Crime recently found that female crime writers receive

only about forty percent of reviews in major publications (Fister par. 3).

Characters in mystery are also gendered. Detectives are usually associated with

stereotypical male traits. Messent writes, "Reason and analysis are opposed to the stereotypical

'feminine' qualities of intuition and emotion, with the latter normally seen as a barrier to the

detachment necessary for the firm decision-making, judgment, and coolness of mind that are so

essential both to successful detective work" (Messent 86). In addition, the author states that

women are usually subject to a lot of violence within the genre. If they do possess any kind of

power, it stems from their sexuality. Messent writes that women "are conventionally portrayed

as 'dangerous, seductive villains…repeatedly position[ed]...as the dangerous other that must be

contained and controlled'" (88). This does not mean that there are no female detectives.

However, they have to adopt male characteristics in order to be successful. Messent gives the

examples of Sue Grafton and Patricia Cornwell's protagonists. Their main characters are women

but also "hard boiled," creating the sense that female detectives cannot retain their femininity

and be successful at the same time (Messent 91-2). The one exception to this rule is cozies

which usually feature female protagonists. However, the violence in these storylines is typically

toned down, further reinforcing the gender divide.

Lopes writes that comic books are male. He states, "Comic book culture…was a

decidedly teen and adult male culture of fanboys" (Lopes 131). This was not always the case.

Lopes writes that comic books were initially for all readers. However, they became more of a

"boys club" over the years. Lopes explains that this decrease in female readership was attributed

to a couple of factors. First, female characters decreased over the years. Even when they were included, women adhered to stereotypical gender roles. A good example of this is Wonder Women. When she was first developed by William Moulton Marston in the 1940s, the superhero was "a Progressive Era feminist" (Lepore location 4539). She had storylines about helping women to fight for equal wages (Lepore location 4579). However, Marston gradually lost control of his character to the publisher, Gardner Fox, who thought that she should be more stereotypically feminine (Lepore location 4513). For example, Wonder Woman was included in many early issues of the Justice League. However, she was little more than a "secretary in a swimsuit," taking notes at meetings (Lepore location 4513). When any kind of action occurred, she conveniently disappeared (Lepore locations 4514-4546). Unfortunately, Wonder Woman's story is not unique. A variety of other female characters have received the same treatment at the hands of comic book publishers, perpetuating the idea that readers are mostly male.

In addition, female characters are often sexualized within comic books. They are portrayed as having large breasts, small waists, and long legs. Women are also shown scantily clad (Robbins par. 11). A recent controversy over a Spiderwoman cover exemplifies how female characters are sexualized within comic books. The comic art was by Milo Manara, well known for his erotically charged illustrations (Abad-Santos par. 15). The artist showed the title character wearing a skin tight uniform, striking a pose that would be impossible to achieve in real life, but which accentuated her figure (Abad-Santos par. 1). The cover was discontinued by Marvel which also issued an apology. As *Vox* writer Alex Abad-Santos states, "female characters have an added layer of sexualization that their male counterparts often do not" (Abad-

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Santos par. 11). As a result, women have long made up a minority of comic book readers. Only

about five percent of comic book readers were estimated to be female in the 1980s (Lopes 131).

This number has improved over the years; now recent estimates suggest that about half percent

of comic book readers are female (Barnett par. 8). Regardless, the idea persists that reading

comic books is a male pursuit.

Romance, on the other hand, is female. Women make up the majority of readers at

eighty-four percent, according to the Romance Writers' Association ("Romance Industry

Statistics" par. 2). There is no research on how many authors within the genre are female.

However, a quick look at the RWA's current members reveals a list consisting largely of female

names ("The Honor Roll"). A recent *P.S. Magazine* article speculates about why romance

fiction is so devalued by society. Author Noah Berlatsky points out that structural misogyny

reinforces the gender divide among romance and other genres. He writes that men are trained

from a very early age to stay away from anything considered female such as romance. To

reinforce this point, he quotes English professor Consuela Francis as saying, "Because romance

novels are so equated with women and femininity, and because we train boys and men to avoid

as much as possible being associated at all with femininity, romance novels become something

that is completely off limits" (qtd. in Berlatsky par. 5). However, as Regis asserts, romance

gives women an ordinate amount of agency compared to other genres. She writes, "'The

romance novel puts the heroine at the center of the book, at least coequal to the hero, or

occupying more of the spotlight than he does" (qtd. in Rodale 19). Because romance is so

unabashedly female, men are likely to feel like they cannot read the genre; it is an affront to their masculinity.

Similarly, young adult fiction is a female domain. According to a recent poll of popular teen titles, more than half—about sixty-three percent of titles—are by women (Lewit par. 2). In addition, the top three YA authors are women: Suzanne Collins, J.K. Rowling and Harper Lee (Lewit par. 1). This is unheard of in other genres. According to *Atlantic* writer Meghan Lewit, "You'd have to scroll all the way to number 20 on last summer's Top 100 Science-Fiction and Fantasy list to find a woman's name (Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley)" (qtd. in Lewit par. 2). In addition, the novels often feature female protagonists. Lewit is extremely optimistic about the reasons behind this gender divide. She writes that "perhaps because of its current extreme trendiness, the genre seems to have transcended some of the critical and gender snobbery plaguing adult lit" (Lewit par. 10). In other words, women simply feel more welcome within the sphere of young adult fiction. While this is true, Lewis ignores the larger structural forces at work behind the gendered nature of fiction as a whole. Women have been all but squeezed out of writing styles such as mystery, fantasy and science fiction. As a result, they have had no other choice but to turn to teen fiction.

Book reviews typically ignore the fact that most authors are male and characters are expected to display stereotypical, gendered behaviors. As mentioned previously, mainstream publications are reluctant to openly criticize titles. However, bloggers have much more leeway because many are independently run. As a result, they do not have to worry about generating revenue. For this reason, bloggers can comment extensively on the positive and negative

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treatment of gender within books. One genre where this was especially prevalent was fantasy.

Bloggers in the sample commented the most on the gendered nature of characters. A good

example is a review of Roberts Jordan's *The Fires of Heaven.* The post is part of a Dribble of

Ink series in which blogger Larry Nolen makes his way through the *Wheel of Time* books,

seminal within the fantasy world. The blogger states that the famed fantasy author treats women

like props. Noel writes, "the scenes with the female characters…were mostly a horror to read."

Women are whipped, their heads are shaved, and they are forced to walk around nude,

supposedly to teach them discipline. The blogger writes that the violence seemed irrelevant to

the plot, comparing it to torture porn (Nolen par. 5). This is significant because Robert Jordan is

highly regarded within the genre. For this reason, his books are usually considered beyond

reproach. For a blogger to say anything about an author of his status speaks to the subversive

potential of blogs. Online reviewers can say much more than those in traditional publications.

Even famous authors are not beyond reproach.

Another example of a fantasy review that subverts the gender divide looks at *Bitter*

Greens by Kate Forsyth. It is about a woman named Charlotte-Rose de la Force living in 1600s

France. De la Force is based on a woman by the same name who wrote "Persinette," the basis

for "Rapunzel." She is ejected from the court of Versailles by King Louis XIV because of her

numerous love affairs (Anna "Bitter Greens" pars. 6). De la Force goes to live with a nun who

tells her the story of Selena Leonelli, also known as "la Strega Bella" or "the beautiful witch"

(Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 7). She was the inspiration for the artist Tiziano (Anna "Bitter

Greens" par. 3). Leonelli supposedly stayed young by drinking the blood of red-haired

girls. The story looks at one in particular, Margherita. Leonelli locks her in a tower while she

grows into womanhood (Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 8).

Ana examines a variety of elements, but focuses on how women are characterized within

the book. She writes that they are used to explore themes of "imprisonment (literal and

figurative), love, sexual power, poverty and choice" (Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 31). During the

period of the book, women were very limited in how they could express themselves

sexually. They were either virgins or whores—there was no in between. Within these roles,

though, Forsyth's female characters demonstrate a surprising amount of agency, according to the

blogger (Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 29). She gives the example of Margherita who, despite her

grim circumstances, repeats to herself, "My name is Margherita. My parents loved me. One day,

I will escape" (Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 28). This shows a determination often missing from

female fantasy characters. Despite this, Ana admits that she has reservations about the

book. For example, the blogger states that there is a rape scene which is gratuitous. The witch is

sexually assaulted by a large group of men (Anna "Bitter Greens" par. 33). However, Ana's

review is still significant because she shows that fantasy can comment on gender roles and still

be enjoyable. At the same time, she holds Forsyth accountable for how she portrays women.

This sends a message—so should other reviewers.

In addition, book bloggers also point to positive portrayals of women within

fantasy. One review that was especially notable looked at *God's War* by Kameron Hurley. A

Dribble of Ink blogger Justin Landon claims that "It's the kind of novel that plants a flag, making

a statement about the deficiencies of genre fiction and challenging societal perceptions as a

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matter of course'" ("God's War" par. 1). The author primarily does this by setting up a world

that plays with gender roles. Men occupy all of the ruling positions in the country of

Chenja. The country of Nasheen, by contrast, is matriarchal. Its residents are not that much

more liberated than those in Chenja. Women are expected to either have children or join the

army (Landon "God's War" par. 5). However, this reversal of gender roles is significant because

the author shows that there are other options than a male dominated society. Hurley's biggest

accomplishment, though, is creating a protagonist who defies all stereotypes about women,

according to the blogger. *God's War* is about an intergalactic assassin named Nyxnissa. She is

rough and unpredictable, characteristics usually gendered as male; by contrast, her love interest,

Rhys, is "softer and more vulnerable" (Landon "God's War" pars. 11-12). By flipping how the

two genders are usually portrayed, Hurley broadens the ways by which female science fiction

characters can be interpreted. It becomes clear that they do not have to fit neatly into certain

stereotypes, an idea that is usually overlooked by mainstream reviewers.

Some fantasy reviews do not go into as much depth concerning issues of gender.

However, they still challenge how the genre is categorized. For example, SF Signal blogger

Nick Sharps looks at *Red Country* by Joe Abercrombie. It is about a woman named Shy South

whose home is destroyed and family kidnapped. She traverses Far Country with her stepfather,

seeking revenge (Sharps "Red Country" par. 3). The author comments on a variety of elements,

from Abercrombie's tone to the plot. Most interesting is Sharps' commentary on the

characterization.   Shy, the protagonist, is especially memorable. She is more than a stock

character whose only purpose is to serve the interests of men. Instead, she is complex,

displaying moments of weakness as well as strength. In addition, Sharps writes that she "is

neither a pedestrian sex-object nor an Amazonian whose sole motivation is revenge" (Sharps

"Red Country" par 9). This assessment is significant because it demonstrates that authors can

defy gender stereotypes and still be enjoyable. Not only that, it makes Shy more compelling as a

character. As Sharps writes, "I consider writing characters to be Abercrombie's strongest suit"

(Sharps "Red Country" par. 8).

Even though YA is dominated by female authors, bloggers still comment on issues of

gender, pointing out when female characters are powerful.   A great example of a review looks at

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins. Tales from the Reading Room blogger Victoria Best

offers an astute analysis of its depiction of gender. She begins by saying that she watched the

first movie with her husband and son (Best par. 1). However, this leads to a more detailed

analysis of the book. It is about a dystopian society where teens are forced to fight to the death

on television (Best par. 2). Katniss Everdeen, the main character, is just sixteen when she enters

the games. She volunteers to take the place of her sister Prim who is much younger. There she

strikes up a relationship with Peeta, the other tribute from her district. The blogger states that

"they realise that an audience-pleasing showmance is the best way to stay alive in the arena."

This could negatively affect her relationship with Gale, though, her best friend since childhood

and potential love interest (Best par. 3).

Best begins by analyzing the novel's literary elements such as the world building and

themes. One of the most remarkable features of the review, though, is the blogger's commentary

on gender. Namely, she states that Katniss possesses stereotypical male traits—she is strong and

adept at using a cross bow.   In addition, the protagonist has little time for emotions, another

stereotypical male trait. On the other hand, Peeta is the embodiment of femininity. He nurtures

Katniss physically and emotionally during the games. He is also a baker by trade which is

considered feminine because of its domestic association. The blogger continues by asking, "if

The Hunger Games has been a huge hit with teenage girls, what does this say about their lives?"

She suggests that it has something to do with stereotypical gender roles in society. Best writes

that girls could be "fed up of feeling so emotional" (Best par. 7). However, she does not come to

a definitive conclusion. Even so, the blogger's review is still significant because it demonstrates

the subversive nature of teen fiction. Even though young adult books largely focus on women,

they do not have to show stereotypical depictions of women. However, YA bloggers commented

less on gender than others, perhaps because the genre is already considered to be female.

Bloggers also criticize YA fiction when female characters are robbed of agency. An

example of this is a significant review looking at *Fade* by A.K. Morgan. Arionna has to live

with her father after her mother dies in a terrible accident. At her new school, she develops a

crush on Dace, a teaching assistant (Becs "Fade" par. 3). The blogger has a couple of major

complaints about the novel. For example, the characterization of Arionna is overly dramatic,

making it difficult to connect with her (Becs "Fade" par. 9). More importantly, though, the

blogger writes that Arionna describes falling in love in a way that makes her sound helpless. At

one point, the protagonist states, "despite the fact I barely knew him, I did trust him. I trusted

him instinctively, implicitly, without hesitation. I shouldn't have. Part of me didn't even want to.

But I did anyway." In other words, she has no choice but to fall for Dace (Becs "Fade" par.

11). The blogger concludes that while she likes parts of the book, the heroine is "too submissive" (Becs "Fade" par. 18). By discussing Arionna's characterization, the blogger demonstrates that romance novels do not have to glorify unhealthy relationships. Again, though, bloggers commented less on gender in romance, perhaps because the genre is already categorized as female.

Another example of a Young Adult fiction review that comments on gender examines *Dark Triumph*. It is the second book in Robin LaFevers' *His Fair Assassin* trilogy. The first novel, *Grave Mercy*, is about the love story between Ismae, an assassin, and her mark. This novel, though, takes a completely different approach, featuring more political intrigue. It also focuses on a different character, Sybella. Like Ismae, she trains for years at a convent to be an assassin. Her goal is to eventually infiltrate the entourage of her father, a ruthless murderer, so she can kill him (Robinson "Dark Triumph" par. 2). Blogger Jen Robinson at Jen Robinson's Book Page does not directly address the issue of gender. It obviously plays an important role, though, when she writes that the novel deals with dark themes. The blogger describes Sybella's father, D'albret, as "loathsome" and "irredeemable." In addition, she states that there is a lot of violence. Robinson goes out of her way to point out, "There is also quite a lot of fighting and killing (yes, by Sybella - that's what she's been trained to do)" ("Dark Triumph" par. 5). The blogger seems to be anticipating a certain response from readers—that a young girl could not possibly be capable of such brutality. Robinson, though, asserts that this is not the case. In doing so, she also asserts that the genre has room for strong, female characters.

Bloggers do not stop at fantasy, though; they also point to strong portrayals of women in science fiction. A good example of this is a review of *The Best of All Possible Worlds* by Karen Lord. Blogger Ana describes it as an "Anthropological Science Fiction Romance" (Ana and Thea "Possible Worlds" par. 11). It is about a group of telepathic humans called Sadiri whose planet is destroyed so they seek refuge on a neighboring planet so they can try to mate with the native population (Ana and Thea "Possible Worlds" par. 13). The book focuses on the romance between Delarua, a government worker, and Dllenahkh, a Sadiri official (Ana and Thea "Possible Worlds" par. 14). According to the blogger, the book contains many steamy sex scenes. However, Delarua is more than a plaything for the pleasure of the hero (Ana and Thea "Possible Worlds" par. 16). This is especially significant because it would be easy for Dllenahkh to abuse his power with the heroine. However, these scenes within the book are navigated with consent. The two main characters negotiate together if and when Dllenahkh can use his mind reading capabilities. This sends a clear message to readers—Delarua is more than a prop.

The subversive potential of book review can also be seen in a SF Signal post about *Andromeda's Fall* by William C. Deitz. The family that rules Earth, the Carlettos, has been brutally slaughtered by Princess Ophelia Ordanus' robot army. Only one person survives—Lady Catherine. Up until this point, she was a spoiled socialite, flitting from party to party. Now Lady Carletto wants to avenge her family's death. She changes her name to Andromeda McKee and joins the Legion, an organization dedicated to fighting Lady Carletto (Anderson par. 5). Blogger Carl Anderson addresses various literary elements in his review. However, he spends a significant amount of time discussing how female characters are developed. Anderson

writes that McKee is complex in a genre that often reduces women to stock characters. She is strong but still retains her femininity, going beyond the "'men with boobs' mold" (Anderson par. 8). Princess Ordanus is very powerful as well. Even if she uses her strength for evil, this is still groundbreaking. Rarely are two women the focus of a science fiction novel. By highlighting Deitz's book, though, the blogger shows that this does not have to be the norm. Interestingly, bloggers did not discuss gender and the genre in too much detail, possibly because there were not that many science fiction reviews in the sample.

In addition, romance bloggers in my sample did not delve deeply into issues of gender, perhaps because the genre is already categorized as female. They often pointed out when heroines were strong, but this is already a trope within the genre, despite many thoughts to the contrary. Mystery bloggers largely ignored how female characters are treated. Most focused on books which strongly adhere to stereotypical depictions of men and women. Male protagonists are often hard-boiled loners; heroines gladly fit into the whodunit mold. This does not mean that mystery books do not deal with gender in complex ways. However, such portrayals were not present among the blogs. This more than likely has something to do with the fact that mystery bloggers primarily focused on vintage titles. As a result, their selections are more likely to contain outdated depictions of gender. It does not account, though, for why bloggers in the sample do not cast a critical eye on such portrayals. In addition, comic books in the sample also appeared to be gendered focusing on male protagonists. However, they did not any address gender issues, either. Their seeming indifference could be explained by the small number of comic book reviews in the sample; only one blog focused specifically on the genre. While

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bloggers are certainly more progressive than traditional reviewers, this demonstrates that work remains to be done.

Conclusion

For years, the gendered nature of literary gatekeepers has gone ignored. As Judith Lorber writes, "Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced" (54). Organizations such as Vida, though, are providing this disruption. Book blogs are also helping to highlight the gendered nature of traditional reviews. They take a slightly different approach than Vida, drawing attention to gendered methods of talking about books and structuring reviews. Sometimes book bloggers do this in subtle ways. For example, they use different communication modes than traditional reviewers. Their language is often personal and emotional. Other times it is obvious. Book bloggers specifically address how science fiction, fantasy, romance, and young adult literature treat female characters. By doing so, they demonstrate that closing the gender divide means more than simply including more women. It also calls for a total paradigm shift in how people think about reviewing. If reviews are ever going to change, they need a completely new discourse.

The work of book bloggers also has interesting ramifications for the roles of women in regards to reviewing. Many are using the internet to enter fields which have typically been gendered as male. For example, the *Medium* article "The Pink Ghetto of Social Media" examines how women are using social media to advance within journalism. Many female reporters are relegated to editing social media accounts because it is seen as fluff work.

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However, women use these positions as jumping off points of furthering their careers (Levinson par. 4). Author Alana Levinson gives the example of Lexi Mainland who used to head the *New York Times* social media staff. At the time of the article, though, she was managing editor at *A Cup of Jo* (Levinson par. 17). Similarly, scholars have noted that more and more women are using the internet to self-publish their books. Typically, women have had a harder time getting published than men. For example, author Allison Morton stated in an interview with the *Guardian*: "'there's definitely a gender disparity among traditionally-published authors. More women buy, write and read books in numerical terms, but more 'weight' and status is given by publishers to books by male authors'" (qtd. in Flood "Self-publishing" par. 7). By self-publishing their novels, though, they can bypass literary gatekeepers completely. Similarly, blogs provide an entry point for women to enter into reviewing. From there, perhaps they can rise in rank, achieving greater heights within the book industry.

Conclusion

Book blogs have changed considerably since I first started my dissertation. Just a few years ago, they were fighting for recognition from the book world. Book blogs eventually gained acceptance. Now, as I wrap up my research, the excitement surrounding them seems to have died down somewhat. Blogging as a phenomenon is in decline, a state usually attributed to the rise of other social media platforms. For example, Jason Kottke wrote in a 2013 post for the Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab's website, "R.I.P. The Blog, 1997-2013" (par. 6). He argued that platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram contributed to blogging's declining popularity (Kottke par. 2). In addition, last year, the *Atlantic* reiterated Kottke's sentiment, stating, "Blogging--I mean, honey, don't even say the word" (Meyer par. 5). Earlier this year, the *New Republic* also declared the death of blogs, citing the shutdown of the once-popular site Gawker.com as an example (Heer "What Were Blogs?" par. 1). Their death seems to be supported by the fact that blogging by teens decreased by half during the period from 2006 to 2010 (Kabadayi par. 2).

Some enthusiasts claim that blogging is not dead, but just appears to be because fewer people engage in the practice casually. In other words, blogging as a whole still exists but in a more professional manner. As *Guardian* journalist Onur Kabadayi writes, "Roughly 15 years after the beginnings of the format, we have arrived at the essence of the blog – a highly trafficked, commercially appealing platform" (par. 14). Kabadayi gives the example of Boomads, a blog network recently launched in Europe, and German publisher Hubert Burda's

partnership with the *Huffington Post* which originated as a blog (par. 9). However, it cannot be denied that blogs have disappeared from popular conversation. They once actively vied for top rankings from Technorati. The website was taken down in 2014, though, when it was purchased by Synacor, an advertising platform. While blogs remain prevalent, no one seems to care about tracking who is the most successful in a world of Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, and Periscope.

This also appears to be true of book blogs. They clearly still play an important role in the book world because publishers regularly send galley copies to bloggers for review. Many of the blogs in the sample for this dissertation are still in operation. In fact, many have become more successful than ever. For example, Book Riot has grown exponentially in recent years, spawning various side projects, including multiple podcasts and the "Book Riot Live" conference. Book Smugglers, another highly ranked blog in my sample, launched its own publishing company specializing in speculative fiction. SF Signal remains popular as well. The blog produces a number of podcasts, garnering a Hugo Award in 2014. General enthusiasm surrounding book blogs seems to have died down, though. It is difficult to gauge the exact size and shape of the book blogosphere now that Technorati is no more. However, it seems that no new book bloggers have emerged as extremely popular in recent years. In addition, one of the websites which I sampled, Book Chick City, is now defunct. The site's creator provided no explanation for its retirement. All clues seem to indicate, though, that the once successful site fell victim to blogging's decline.

Despite their decreasing popularity, I see opportunities for further research regarding book blogs. For example, I initially wanted to interview book bloggers as part of my

dissertation. I contacted all of the ones in my sample to see if they were available to talk over the phone. For group blogs, one contributor was selected for an interview. However, very few bloggers responded to my queries. I felt like I did not have a representative sample so their responses did form the core of my study. In the future, though, I would like to get a larger sample of bloggers to ask about their practices, specifically regarding genre fiction. How do they view the cultural status of mystery, science fiction, romance, and fantasy?   I'd also like to interview female bloggers about their involvement in the book world. Blogs seem to have opened doors for women within the book industry.   The few bloggers whom I spoke with, all women, used their blogs as jumping off points for jobs and general networking. Interviewing book bloggers would provide insight into whether or not this is true.

In addition, my dissertation revealed that bloggers write about genre fiction differently from other literary gatekeepers. I would like to take my research a step further and examine whether this has actually had an impact on genre fiction's acceptance by society.   There are a couple of ways that this could be measured. I could examine books which participated in blog tours. Tracking titles' sales before and after tours would provide insight into blogs' impact. If sales increased, it could be assumed that blogs are generally having a positive effect on genre fiction's acceptance. I might also perform a content analysis of mainstream review publications to see how much genre fiction they review. I could also examine the language that these mainstream publications use to describe genre. Do they use negative or positive language, or some mixture of the two?   That would also provide a more concrete understanding of blogs' influence.

As the excitement surrounding book blogs declines, readers are embracing other social

media platforms. Goodreads is more popular than ever before. This could be because it has not

been co-opted by mainstream literary gatekeepers. The site, while owned by Amazon, is run

solely by readers, for readers. In addition, more and more are using Instagram to provide

exposure to titles. While the old adage states that you cannot judge a book by its cover, members

of Instagram assert that this is not the case. "Bookstagram" users post photos of books laid out

in an attractive manner, hoping to entice potential readers. Other platforms such as podcasts are

also becoming increasingly popular. Their success can be attributed to a couple of reasons.

First, they allow creators to go into more depth about titles than traditional reviewers can. In

addition, podcasts are more portable than book blogs. They can be listened to while doing other

activities. Finally, YouTube is another platform which book lovers are starting to explore. Book

Rioter contributor Kate Scott calls it a "an incredibly vibrant community of people who

vlog…about books" (par. 1). Videos range from people simply talking about books to short

animated videos.

I believe that other book-based social media outlets will only continue to grow in

popularity over time. This is evidenced by the most recent Book Expo of America Bloggers

Conference. Many of the panels focused on other social media outlets, not just blogs. For

example, the description for "United: Bloggers, Youtubers, and Instagrammers" reads: "The

digital conversation is growing beyond the blogosphere! There are so many channels online to be

talking books…" ("BEA Bloggers Conference" pars. 20-21). In addition, "The Bookstagram

Workshop" promised tips on "…styling the perfect photo, optimizing your reach, strategic

hashtags, the best equipment, editing tricks, and more!" ("BEA Bloggers Conference" par. 37). Blogs, then, are clearly just the beginning of the reviewing revolution. It is difficult to say whether Instagram, YouTube, and podcast users will have the same impact on the book world as bloggers. However, online reviewing will only become more democratized and engaging as technology advances.

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