What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age

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How do readers experience books, and what do they do with those experiences? Reading is an activity that is dynamic, meaningful, and infused with energy. It is diverse, varying across time and place and involving interactions with manifold artefacts. Readers pored over the *Dream Pool Essays* of Shen Kuo, printed with clay movable type in 1088. In Enlightenment Europe, readers debated Diderot’s multivolume *Encyclopédie*. Twentieth-century readers in the Philippines passed around Tagalog romance pocketbooks and popular comics; in twenty-first-century Western Australia, children learn Noongar language through locally produced picture books.\(^1\) Reading is a bedrock of culture, a seam that runs through the past into projections about the future. Adaptable and enduring, books have not been replaced by new media but integrated into the convergent media ecosystems and transmedia story worlds of the twenty-first century. They circulate as paperbacks, hardbacks, ebooks, web publications, and audiobooks; they provide the core intellectual property for films, TV series, and video games. As books have persisted and developed across multiple forms, so too has reading, which in contemporary culture might mean listening to an audiobook on your phone, leaving a comment on a chapter of web-published fanfiction, or leafing through a giant hardcover tome.

In this book, I present a model for understanding the manifold practices of contemporary recreational readers. *What Readers Do* shows readers as active—part of evolving networks, engaged in aesthetic practices that give shape and style to life, involved in moral issues, nurturing themselves in solitary moments and contributing to energizing social activities. Readers navigate the institutions and systems of twenty-first-century life in acts that are both culturally and commercially significant.

Because it involves the acquisition of books, one way or another, reading is the foundational practice of a sizable (though not enormous) sector within the entertainment and media industries. The value of the global book publishing industry was estimated at $114.9 billion for 2023—more than the movie and music industries, less than video games—and has remained relatively steady over the
past ten years. While value remains stable, the production of titles has increased, particularly with the advent of digital technologies that make self-publishing and print-on-demand books accessible and low-cost. Amid the massive disruptions of the global Covid-19 pandemic, book buying surged: in 2020, book sales rose 8.2 percent in the United States, 7.8 percent in Australia, and 5.5 percent in the UK, where over 200 million print books were sold that year. Sales have slipped a little since then, returning to a baseline that confirms an overall picture of stability for books and reading. The economic context of readers in the twenty-first century also includes the ever-more powerful technology companies—Google, Facebook, Amazon—that have come to exercise great influence on book publishing, marketing, discoverability, buying, and reading. These companies, as well as the multinational media conglomerates that house major publishing houses and, to a lesser extent, small book-related businesses, profit from the activities of readers.

Book reading, though, is about more than money. What Elizabeth Long terms the “social infrastructure of reading” exceeds commerce to take in numerous other forms of relations. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo coin the phrase the “reading industry” to describe the mesh of agents, institutions, and organizations, including government and not-for-profit bodies, that support reading for entertainment. Activity in the reading industry is vigorous. Reading-related programs and events have been burgeoning for decades as established components of the creative and cultural industries. Between 2010 and 2019, for example, Melbourne’s Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas hosted 2,389 events and reached 419,927 audience members. In Africa, the Hargeisa International Book Fair in Somaliland draws an annual audience of 10,000; newer African literary festivals include the Abantu Festival in South Africa, which centers Black reading cultures, launched in 2016, and the Feminart Art and Book Festival in Malawi launched in 2019.

Reading is also vibrantly present online. BookTok, a subset of video social media platform TikTok, has amassed over 147 billion views. The website Goodreads, where readers can catalogue and review the books they read, has more than 120 million members. Reese’s Book Club, headed by actor and producer Reese Witherspoon, has over 2.6 million followers on Instagram; #ReadwithJenna hosted by former First Daughter and morning TV show host Jenna Bush Hager has 223,000. The digital creative writing and reading platform Wattpad is visited by over 85 million monthly users, including 7 million from the Philippines, its second largest market after the United States; 90 percent of time spent on Wattpad is from a mobile device.

This dynamic activity has developed despite ongoing consternation about the negative effects of screens on book reading. Or not “despite”—the dynamism of reading activity has developed alongside and in relation to the digitization of everyday life. Like listening to vinyl records and other pre-digital cultural practices, book reading has been thrown into relief as an object
of interest, a pastime associated by many with an earlier, perhaps simpler era. But the effects of digital technology on books and reading have been anything but straightforward. Drilling down from the big picture to consider individual readers reveals varied, distinct practices. Digital technology distracts some readers. For others, it provides new opportunities for focused discussion of reading, as well as unprecedented access to books—especially in genres such as romance and fantasy fiction. Furthermore, print and digital are not mutually exclusive but coexist. A reader may read an ebook then admire its cover at a bookshop, or purchase a print book and post a picture of it on Instagram. This is what it means to inhabit a post-digital environment; print and digital technologies interact in multiple, sometimes surprising, ways. Contemporary book reading flexibly incorporates digital, in-person, and print-based practices.

The different ways to engage with the newer technologies of reading are just one kind of variety that is found within the matrix of contemporary reading practices. In Reader’s Block: A History of Reading Difference (2022), Matthew Rubery explores how neurodivergent readers, including those with synesthesia and dyslexia, make sense of print, and emphasizes the vast spectrum of reading practices that exists. There are many ways to read a book—cover-to-cover or in parts, fast or slow, with intensity or casually, as a treat or with a touch of resentment. What Rita Felski calls common “motives for reading”—she identifies recognition, knowledge, shock, and enchantment—vary from reader to reader, and moment to moment. Reading is individualized, can change across a person’s lifetime (or week), and is inflected by factors such as a reader’s gender, sexuality, and cultural identity.

Sometimes this variety is not recognized by the institutions of the book industry, with negative impacts on readers and on book culture. When it comes to cultural identity, for example, research by Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente finds that UK publishers often assume a White readership for novels, limiting the diversity of books published and the opportunities available for authors of color. Similarly, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo note that Whiteness shapes many online spaces and reading communities, creating hostile environments for racialized readers. The assumptions baked into these facets of book culture highlight the need to ask the question, who reads? Is there a demographic answer?

Who Reads?

A review of recent demographic studies of readers suggests that book reading is more widespread, and more diverse, than is sometimes credited. There is no uncomplicated picture of declining reading, ageing readers, or a narrow reading class; much depends on how data is collected, and which events or practices
are considered. The varied answers to the question of who reads show just how important it is to understand reading as diverse, dynamic, and multidimensional.

Reading is one of the most accessible forms of cultural participation, because it is low-cost and because the skills required are taught in the early years of school. In the broadest sense, the group of readers includes everyone who has acquired literacy in primary or elementary school. This is the vast majority of the population in the Global North, and a significant majority worldwide. According to the World Economic Forum, the global literacy rate in 2023 was 87 percent. Global inequality remains, particularly between sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the lowest literacy rate, and the rest of the world: according to 2015 data, in Niger, for example, the overall literacy rate is less than 30 percent, and even for youth—who are typically more literate than older generations in the Global South—the literacy rate is low (36.5 percent of those aged between 15 and 24). To talk about readers is to talk about the large majority of the world’s population, skewed toward those in developed nations.

There is a difference between literacy and recreational reading, and the focus of this book is on the smaller group of people who read for pleasure. Various studies identify and describe this cohort. In 2005, Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright wrote that a quarter of people did not read books on a typical day, but more than half read for over an hour; further, most people thought they should be reading more. This rate has been consistent over several decades. In Australia, a 2017 report found that 41 percent of the adult population read more than ten books in the last twelve months (approximately one book per month). A 2022 Gallup poll found that 27 percent of US respondents read at least ten books per year. Across these different surveys, then, the group of frequent readers seems to be about a quarter to half of the population.

These studies ask about the quantity of books read. A 2021 report by Rachel Noorda and Kathi Inman Berens took a different approach. Their representative survey of the US population found that 53 percent of respondents were avid book “engagers,” engaging with four or more books per month. Their term “engager” is a deliberate widening of the term “reader” to include “buying, borrowing, subscribing to, reading or gifting a printed book, an ebook, or audiobook in part or in whole.”

The demographic characteristics of recreational readers also shift somewhat according to the terms of the study. Most studies agree that frequent readers tend to be highly educated, and women. Wendy Griswold coined the term “the reading class” to describe the small, but influential, group of frequent readers, who are middle class, metropolitan, and well educated. The 2017 Australia Council report found that nearly half (46 percent) of frequent readers were tertiary-educated, and that two-thirds of frequent readers were women. However, there is divergence when
it comes to other demographic characteristics. The subset of “avid book engagers” in Noorda and Berens’s survey was younger and more ethnically diverse than the general survey population: 67 percent of Black or African American respondents and 59 percent of Latina/Latino/Latinx respondents were avid book engagers.25 This contrasts with some other data on readers. Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright suggest that “white women have by far the highest reading rate (61%), followed by white men and African American women (41% and 43%, respectively).”26 They describe a 2004 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) survey which “found that 26% of Hispanics, 37% of African Americans, and 51% of white Americans read literature.”

The word “literature” is a notable qualifier here. Kinohi Nishikawa has written of the massive popularity of urban fiction—cheaply printed sensationalist pulp novels—among Black Americans, and uses the term “merely reading” to describe the pleasurable, non-educational, and non-political reading of these popular novels.27 Surveys that ask about the reading of literature may not pick up on this significant reading practice, or indeed the multiplicity of reading practices within different communities. Nishikawa uses Janice Radway’s term “variable literacies” to distinguish between educational reading, where the latest results show African Americans scoring poorly on standardized tests, and reading for pleasure, where the facts are quite different: he notes a 2014 Pew Research Centre study that found more Black readers (81 percent) had read at least one book in the past year compared to White or Hispanic readers (76 and 67 percent), and that African Americans read more ebooks, audiobooks, and books in print than any other group.28 Decisions about what kind of reading counts (and is counted) can obscure or reveal the variety of reading practices.

There is also conflicting data about whether older people read more than young people. In 2017, the Australia Council reported that frequent readers were most likely to be over thirty: nearly half were aged between thirty and fifty-nine, while another large segment, 38 percent, were aged sixty and over. Such findings are often used to paint a picture of reading as an activity in decline, as its enthusiasts age and are not replaced. Despite noting that anxiety about reading rate always accompanies a popular reading culture, Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright participate in such discourse, writing of “alarming reports” from the NEA in 1982, 1992, and 2002 showing “a steady decline in reading, especially the reading of literature and especially among young adults.” They note this finding is consistent with a Netherlands report, and conclude, “there is a generation gap—older, highly educated people hang on to the reading habit, but younger ones do not.”29 Yet Noorda and Berens’s study shows that avid book engagers are younger than the general survey population, suggesting countertrends and emerging bookish practices that warrant attention.30
Overall, the question of who reads for pleasure cannot be answered with “everyone.” Recreational readers tend to be well-educated women; the archetypal twenty-first-century reader shares some affinities with what I have elsewhere written about as the middle-class, feminized literary middlebrow. But, at the same time, there is not just one kind of recreational reader or reading. It is important to remain open to the diversity of readers and reading experiences. Grim accounts of a small, shrinking reading class can mask the ways reading endures and adapts. Not all recreational reading is visible, and not all of it is captured in surveys. This book aims to explore in more detail the range of different experiences within recreational reading.

What Is Contemporary Recreational Reading?

Variations in activity raise the question of the scope of this book: what reading it includes and excludes. My focus is on contemporary practices, with a scope that encompasses the twenty-first century to date. Studying the contemporary period raises several challenges, including the difficulty of accounting for the rapid pace of change, especially digital change, and discerning patterns among noise. Nonetheless, studying the contemporary has particular value. Such research has the potential to intervene in current debates and practices by highlighting the obstacles to a rich reading culture, as well as the diverse positive aspects of book reading that warrant celebration and encouragement. My focus is also on recreational reading. I understand recreational reading broadly as reading that is done for pleasure. In general, I distinguish recreational reading from academic or professional reading, but there are overlaps. Both recreational and professional readers can read quickly and slowly, with passionate investment or light detachment. Further, recreational reading is not the opposite of work; practices such as writing an online book review or making a reaction video, for example, may involve considerable effort and skill. In the contemporary media environment, such activity has been theorized as “play labor” or “playbour” where it is ostensibly done for fun, or “hope labor” where the creator has an eye to future paid opportunities. In book culture specifically, voluntary labor is descended from a long history of fandom practices that bestow detailed attention on texts, such as the creation of fanzines or encyclopedic databases. This labor—sometimes paid, though rarely lucrative—complicates any simple division between reading for fun and for work. Still, the focus of this book is reading that is understood as undertaken for pleasure or recreation.
That still leaves the term “reading” to be defined. Reading is more than eyes on a page. In a sense, this whole book addresses the question of what reading is, and the multiple activities I elaborate resist the idea that an answer can be provided in one sentence. To clarify my scope, though, I will make temporary use of one such sentence, from Graham Allen, who defines reading as “the process of extracting meaning from texts.”35 The word *extracting* has environmentally unfriendly connotations so I’ll set it to one side, but the three other elements of process, texts, and meaning can be unfolded to sketch some of the parameters of this book.

Reading is a process. It is dynamic, changing from moment to moment, shifting over a person’s lifetime and affected by their context. The process of reading is interactive, occurring in collaboration with settings, objects, people, and institutions that themselves change. With scholars such as Long, Fuller, and Rehberg Sedo, I argue in this book that reading is social; supported by institutional and industrial infrastructure, and a constitutive element of networks of people, organizations, and technologies. All of this is in a state of constant flux, affecting the processes of readers. For example, reading is embedded in an industry and a larger capitalist system, not only because books are consumer goods (produced and marketed by the publishing industry), but also because of the commodification of attention and user data online, and the commercial imperatives that drive the broader cultural and creative industries in which readers participate. These can dramatically affect the processes of reading. When Amazon closed its subsidiary bookselling operation Booktopia in 2022, purchasing options for readers were narrowed; when Wattpad introduced its Stars program for popular authors in 2019, readers’ digital engagement was overtly linked to financial opportunities for writers, which in turn shaped the stories that were published and promoted.

In the moment of reading, as well as the moments before, between, and after reading, readers move among online and offline settings. There is no simple way to approach the online behavior of readers, which slips across platforms and is integrated into diverse commercial and social arrangements. Likewise, offline reading situations are complex; state-sponsored reading activities may espouse an enthusiasm for literacy development while also emphasizing fun, for example, and the emphasis on each element may shift from one day to the next. As a process, reading also moves between the social and the solitary. Many online and offline reading situations incorporate striking, visible interactions between people. But there is also an intimate core to reading—the time that a reader spends with a book can be private. This book proposes imaginatively following readers into their different settings and scenes, in order to build the fullest possible picture of the processes of contemporary recreational reading.
Reading occurs in relation to texts. My attention in this book is primarily on the books produced by the trade sector of the publishing industry. This is not a study of reading newspapers, magazines, textbooks, reference material, or websites. I acknowledge the fluid boundary between book reading—especially on screen—and other forms of reading, which are linked in a media ecosystem. I narrow the focus to books because there is a particular status to book reading, a position in a cultural hierarchy that I am keen to interrogate. This status endures, even though book objects themselves are formally unstable, as the rise of audiobooks has made clear in recent years. Another reason for focusing on books is the distinctive trajectory the book publishing industry has traced in the twenty-first century. Unlike the music industry, for example, the key product of the publishing industry has not fragmented. Albums have largely been atomized into songs, but books are still the dominant unit of content in publishing. Not only does this affect the economy in which readers participate, but it also affects modes of consumption. I focus most on novels, which are predominantly associated with reading for pleasure. The books that I look at in this work are principally in English, and the readers Anglophone, due to my own language limitations.

Reading produces meaning, a somewhat difficult term to define. One way of thinking about meaning is that I consider reading as a cultural activity, rather than a means of acquiring information. While my approach is broad, by focusing on culture I do exclude some areas of inquiry. For example, I do not track eyeballs or look at the neurological processes involved in reading, either on print or on screen. Nor do I engage in depth with the considerable research on children’s reading and the acquisition of reading skills and literacy.

I am interested in reading as culture, and culture is an amorphous concept; in Raymond Williams’s phrase, it is one of the “two or three most complicated words in the English language.” He offers three, sequential definitions: culture was first used to describe a process of tending, including tending one’s own development and growth; it developed to also refer to a group’s “whole way of life”; and then further evolved to describe “the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort” associated with museums, art, books, and so on. All three senses persist, and in this book I remain alert to them all, while acknowledging the distinctions and tensions between them. Writing in The New Yorker, Joshua Rothman observes that people tend toward one or other of Williams’s aspects, for example “toward the ‘culture’ that makes you a better person or the ‘culture’ that just inducts you into a group.” These tendencies align with shifts in the positive or negative connotations of the word “culture,” but Rothman argues that at its core, the word “culture” represents a wish: “that a group of people might discover, together, a good way of life; that their good way of life might express itself in their habits, institutions, and activities; and that those, in turn, might help individuals flourish in their own ways.” These aspirations toward flourishing, this search for meaning, is what I focus on (and indeed advocate for) in my study of reading.
Structure of This Book: Methodology, Networks, and Conduct

This book's central argument is that recreational reading in the twenty-first century is a multidimensional cultural practice that involves social and private, aesthetic and moral behaviors. Capitalism provides the ground within which readers act—it constrains and directs reader behaviors, and these behaviors in turn reinforce or oppose capitalist logics at the same time as they strive to meet readers’ needs. In the chapters of this book, I develop this argument by elaborating a methodology for studying contemporary reading practices; then identifying the networks that readers constitute through the connections they form; and then working through different dimensions of reading using examples drawn from contemporary practices. These examples come from research I have undertaken over the past two decades, synthesized with other qualitative studies of book reading. This book, then, is both an overview of current reading practices based on extant scholarship and my own research and the presentation of a model for understanding what readers do: their dynamic, networked practices of aesthetic and moral conduct.

The central epistemological question of the book is a version of the question with which I began this introduction: What can we know about contemporary readers and their reading practices? In Chapter 1, “Researching Readers,” I propose a conceptual model and methodology for the study of contemporary reading. The chapter begins by outlining existing approaches from literary studies, an academic discipline closely connected to recreational reading, with particular focus on reader response theory, including key theories from Louise Rosenblatt, Judith Fetterley, and, in a more contemporary context, Felski. I then turn to the social sciences, especially book history and cultural sociology. I review the methods and emphases of studies of historical readers, such as the groups of women readers studied by Barbara Sicherman, the African American literary societies researched by Elizabeth McHenry, and the Melbourne reading diaries examined by Susan K. Martin, all from the nineteenth century. These are complemented by work on more contemporary readers, such as Radway’s research on romance fiction readers and Megan Sweeney’s study of women’s reading in prison. The chapter then advocates a model that combines the social sciences and the humanities, bringing together attention to texts, self-reflexivity and interest in materiality, people and social relations (including commercial and industrial relations). I use actor-network theory (and similar approaches such as pragmatic sociology) to focus on the connections readers form with books, other readers, academics, critics, publishers, and authors. This model and methodology is elaborated and exemplified in the subsequent chapters.

My book is based on the actions of readers—I’m most interested in verbs, not nouns—and Chapter 2, “Networks of Readers,” considers the most foundational
of these actions: how readers constitute themselves as readers in different settings. How do they affiliate with groups, and how do these groups affect the identity of “reader”? I consider readers as consumers, moving through bookstore environments. I then look at readers as citizens, who interact with the state and the education system. And finally I look at readers as conversationalists, discussing books in clubs, at events, and online. In each case—and including a mini case study of readers at the Melbourne Writers Festival—I consider the actions of readers in attending physical spaces, as well as how they move across online platforms. The disaggregation of the category of “readers” into these different settings and groups, and the identification of some reading networks and their distinctive qualities, grounds the subsequent chapters’ analyses of the conduct of readers in these networks.

Chapter 3, “The Aesthetic Conduct of Readers,” elaborates how readers treat books as models for living. In using books to express their style and shape their lives, readers may take on (and perform) a general bookishness, or they may align themselves with and take inspiration from specific genres, authors or books. The chapter uses qualitative textual and image analysis to describe readers’ aesthetic conduct in three settings. First, I analyze bibliomemoirs—books about reading books—as narrativized accounts of the influence of books on a life, pitched as models for everyday readers to follow. Second, I consider social media as an arena for readers to engage in aesthetic conduct, paying particular attention to Instagram. Third, I look at how members of a reading for well-being group set up at an Australian library present their aesthetic responses to one another, considering the formation of bookish identity and taste as a dynamic, modifiable process.

Chapter 4, “The Moral Force of Readers,” argues that readers use their reading to form and test views on right and wrong behavior. I propose that readers’ morality works on three, overlapping levels: in relation to society, by positioning reading as a valuable activity; in relation to the content of books, by judging characters and reading for empathy; and in relation to book culture and the publishing industry, by responding to the actions and statements of authors and publishers. The specific forms of moral conduct that contemporary readers enact are illustrated through analyses of book festivals, the reading for well-being group introduced in Chapter 3, and social media campaigns against books and authors.

While I have separated aesthetic and moral conduct in these chapters, the two overlap. In a special issue of the *European Journal of Culture Studies* dedicated to the relationship between aesthetics and morality, Giselinde Kuipers, Thomas Franssen, and Sylvia Hollan argue, citing Habermas, that the intellectual separation of these two domains is a historically contingent product of modernity. Instead, they propose, aesthetic, and moral judgments frequently “operate in tandem” in everyday life, as processes of meaning-making through which individuals express their sense of self and their relations to others. In Chapter 5, I look at the overlapping of aesthetic and moral conduct in relation to one, intensive site of
contemporary reader practice: private reading, which I argue can involve the use of reading to nurture and nourish the self.

Reading may be embedded in social infrastructure, but it also provides quiet moments of solitude. The privacy of these moments, when reading feels like an encounter with the self, is at the core of the value many people place on reading: concentration, flow, and pleasure. Through analysis of newspaper articles, blogs, and social media posts, this chapter considers three dominant discourses used to describe personal reading experiences. The first is eroticism, where erotics is understood as sensuality, desire, and satisfaction. The second is deep reading, a science-inflected understanding of the value of uninterrupted, sustained reading and its benefits for the reader. Finally, I consider the discourse of mindful reading, which sees reading a meditative practice. All three act as distinctively modulated articulations of (the often commodified concept) self-care. Their forceful normative accounts of what reading should be—passionate, profound, healing—can diminish more casual experiences, but these media accounts are nonetheless revealing as popular attempts to frame what is special about book reading.

Together, these chapters illuminate the multiple dimensions of reading as a post-digital cultural practice, through a matrix of investigation that includes both print and digital books, and both online and offline reader behavior. The picture revealed is an exciting one. With all its diversity, book reading is a creative, generative activity, one that can prompt conversation and reflection. In my own life, reading has provided meaningful interior experiences as well as cherished personal and professional relationships, developed in person and through digital communication. If this sounds like cheerleading, I want to also acknowledge the difficulties faced by readers. To speak of my own life again, I’ve often felt angry at the intractable Whiteness and gender inequity of the publishing industry and its products, suspicious of the use to which my online reviews and star ratings might be put, and frustrated by the difficulty of navigating my way toward books I want to read. The fact that readers are capable of enlivening their worlds through books does not take away from the harmful structures and impediments to flourishing that characterize life in the twenty-first century. There is much work to be done. The part of the work done by this book, and my motivation for writing it, is to bring about enhanced understanding of the multifaceted value of recreational reading, so that academics, arts workers, and book industry professionals can support more people to pursue their own reading practices, in their own way, and according to their own interests, thereby enriching and diversifying book culture.

The book is an argument for the vitality, agency, and creativity of readers—not just when their reading is immersive and transformative, but also when it is limited or shaped by commerce, or when it is casual or interrupted. In putting readers at the center of inquiry, I celebrate the capacity of readers to integrate books with their lives, and by so doing alter themselves and the society in which they live. Underlying my work is a pragmatic view of books as things to be used,
that circulate and interact, that change and are changed. Despite the constraints that affect us all, there is a sphere of action possible for readers. They activate that space of possibility by moving among networks and expressing aesthetic and moral judgments. Amid the noise and busyness of the twenty-first century, reading books is, and remains, a cultural force.
Reading is composed of complex, variable processes that have evolved with historical and cultural specificity alongside different forms of writing, from the Sumerian cuneiform tablets used over 5,000 years ago to the reflowable pages of a twenty-first-century e-reader. The categories of perception that shape how reading is understood have also developed over time and across cultures. Within academia, scholarship on reading has been pursued in numerous disciplines, providing varied theoretical resources. In proposing a cross-disciplinary methodology for studying contemporary recreational reading, I turn first to consider reading as it has been conceptualized in the discipline of literary studies. I pay particular attention to how literary studies’ attention to texts prioritizes professional, expert reading, leading to an unsettled relationship with recreational reading. Literary studies offers insights into reading drawn from decades of careful encounters with texts, and richly elaborated concepts and vocabulary for analyzing reading experience. The second section of the chapter considers empirical approaches to the study of reading from the social sciences, especially book history and cultural sociology, most of which are based in an interest in the practices of non-academic readers. What these disciplines offer reading studies is a focus on people, on materiality, and on social structures as well as individual experience.

The most productive methodology for studying contemporary recreational readers, I argue, reconciles these two predominant approaches to reading: from the humanities, privileging texts, and from the social sciences, privileging human subjects. To achieve a rapprochement between these disciplinary trajectories, I turn to actor-network theory, which has been taken up in literary studies, and to allied approaches in the social sciences which have characterized field-leading work on reading over the past decades. A networked, grounded approach is empirical as well as theoretical; puts texts and people in relational networks; accounts for aesthetic and moral practices; and, most importantly, is reader-centered. It is ideally placed