Passages such as these provide readers an opportunity to contemplate their own place in the world. The chapter, “Homeland Alone: 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq,” highlights titles that help readers begin to understand the recent proliferation of war, while in “Exit Strategies: Said, Coetzee, Saramago, Roth,” Persky offers glimpses into his own end-of-career thinking.

In each essay, Persky tells stories, using ideas presented by other authors to create his own narrative. He engages not only with contemporary and classical critical and literary theorists but also with his fellow contemporary reviewers. For those of us who are teachers, Persky welcomes us into discussion that motivates us to address contemporary issues and even his belief that the world is going to hell in a hand basket, as the saying goes. He asks, “What is to be done?” and answers himself with an uncharacteristically optimistic response: “What we should do is continue to teach people to read books and to criticize the gadgets and content of capitalist pop culture. We should continue to try to reform health care, regulate and restrain capitalism, and attempt to save the planet. We should do the little things in our neighbourhoods, and we should join political parties and other organizations and try, as we used to say, to change the world” (58). Persky’s contemplations provide background and insight through which we can consider ways that might facilitate doing this while inviting our students and our friends to do the same.

DENEL REHBERGE SEDO
Mount Saint Vincent University


From the eighteenth century on, reading groups have frequently been satirized and scorned. Often characterized as groups of earnest, middle-class, middle-aged women seeking self-improvement on the one hand and gossip or therapy on the other, reading groups trouble the dominant notion that adult reading should be a private, internalized, and individual practice. This edited volume examines a variety of reading groups in order to understand how and why they mattered, both to their members and to our historical knowledge of shared reading practices.
Reading Communities is an important contribution to the scholarship of the history of reading that takes an interdisciplinary approach to understand reading groups as significant sites through which to think about the cultural politics of taste, the social relations of gender, and the economic dynamics of book publishing, marketing, and reception.

Sedo’s introduction begins with the observation that all the contributions share “the assumption that shared reading is both a social process and a social formation” (1). That is, each of the authors views a particular reading group as a set of interdependencies that build and define a community organized around sociable reading. Betty Schellenberg’s opening chapter, “Reading in an Epistolary Community in Eighteenth-Century England,” is a fascinating study of letters about books exchanged between the Bluestocking sisters Elizabeth Montagu and Sarah Scott, across a span of fifty-five years (1740–95). Schellenberg analyzes these women’s reading practices and their epistolary construction of a reading community despite the challenges of distance, finances, and book availability.

The idea that shared reading can construct a sense of community is also at the heart of Robert Snape’s chapter, “Reading Across the Empire: the National Home Reading Union Abroad.” Snape examines this organization’s records and reading lists to reconstruct its activities in Britain, South Africa, and Canada from the late 1880s to the 1960s and demonstrates convincingly the importance of organized and authorized reading to the imperial identities of white settlers against the “other” of the colonized. This theme of identity formation through reading is picked up again, in a different way, in Linsey Howie’s chapter, “Speaking Subjects: Developing Identities in Women’s Reading Communities.” Like Schellenberg’s Bluestocking readers, the Australian women Howie studied in the mid-1990s developed awareness of both self and other through shared reading, allowing the author to assert that book groups develop “relational ways of being” among their members and support “subjects-in-process” whose shared reading leads to “shifting self-knowledges” (141).

Whereas the above authors focus on the reader as subject, other contributors are interested in how shared-reading practices affect readers’ relationships to the texts themselves. Jenny Hartley reconstructs the experience of nineteenth-century serial reading with a small group reading Charles Dickens’s Little Dorrit in instalments over nineteen months. She describes her group’s recognition of the importance of memory over the reading period, the value of reading aloud as a group, the tendency to re-read the instalment...
during the month of waiting for the next one, and the importance of advertisements and the other matter surrounding the printed text.

Hartley is one of several authors who undertook participant-observer research for their studies. Sedo’s own chapter, on a virtual young adult book club, is based on four months of participation in online discussions of young adult books. She quotes other contributors and sets out some of the social rules of this reading group of adults discussing books targeted at young adults. Unlike other reading clubs that consider their activities as leisure pursuits, many of Sedo’s informants are teachers, librarians, and authors who use the online discussion in their professional lives. The lines between reading for pleasure and reading professionally are often part of the cultural tensions surrounding reading groups, and nowhere is this more evident than in Daniel Born’s chapter on Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and the Great Books Enterprise at the University of Chicago in the 1940s. Born contextualizes his meticulous study of the academic politics and overbearing personality of Hutchins in American post-war cultural debates. Hutchins was the ultimate believer in books, and the great ideas they contain, as tools of individual and communal improvement; although his zealous advocacy of a Great Books canon seems outmoded today, his faith in the individual and collective promise of shared reading still resonates.

Hutchins’s Great Books program is the exception in this volume because he aimed to elevate reading to “highbrow” values, while the majority of reading groups discussed here have been variously viewed as having “middlebrow” or “lowbrow” tastes. In “The Growth of Reading Groups as a Feminine Leisure Pursuit,” Anna Kiernan argues that television has given rise to a new demographic of “feminine” (read: low culture) readers through such popular programs as Oprah’s Book Club (US) and Richard and Judy’s Book Club (UK). She, like many of the other contributors, draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s influential theories of taste and distinction and uses feminist analysis to “identify and defuse simplistic divisions between high and low culture and reading practices” (136).

The final two chapters wade into this battle of the brows by studying the relationships between publishers and book club readers. Anna S. Ivy argues that the guides for reading groups published at the back of books often constitute the kinds of “bad” questions about literature that academics devalue, namely questions about readers’ feelings or that ask them to speculate beyond the text itself. She then analyzes an on-air discussion between Oprah Winfrey and Toni Morrison to conclude that
distinctions between “bad” and “good” questions, non-professional and professional modes of reading, are not nearly as neat as academics insist, and that the “the graduate seminar and the encounter group [ie. book club] threaten to merge rather easily” 177). The final chapter by Sedo, Danielle Fuller, and Claire Squires looks at the relationship between book club readers and publishers through the crucial process of a book club’s decision of what to read next. They study publishers’ marketing practices, websites, and author promotions, and interview booksellers and readers to conclude that publishers’ recognition of the purchasing power of book club members may not be wholly cynical. Instead, they conclude that this may construct a reader-centered publishing model in which book consumption may have an influence on book production.

Reading Communities: from Salons to Cyberspace is an excellent collection of essays on reading groups that builds on the landmark scholarship of Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long to study specific instances of shared reading in relation to gender, genre, and cultural debates over taste and value. My only complaint is that the book’s definition of “community” seems limited to organized, self-recognized, and self-contained reading societies, clubs, and groups, primarily of women reading fiction. The next step in the scholarship will be to analyze other shared reading demographics (the most obvious in terms of organized reading clubs being adolescents and working-class men) or genre-specific reading clubs (such as comic books, mysteries, or non-fiction). As well, we need to see more elastic definitions of reading communities, organized less by self-subscription than by subculture (e.g., what were 1970s punks reading?) or social spaces (e.g., prisons). This is not to diminish the important work of these scholars but to point to the exciting possibilities their research opens up.

CANDIDA RIFKIND

University of Winnipeg


A marketing tool, the book-jacket is part of the bookselling business today. Yet the alternative name, dust-jacket, indicates the original function of the cover: it was protection for the bound book. The vast