

A Review of “Exploring the Placelessness of Reading among Older Teens in a Canadian Rural
Municipality” by Paulette Rothbauer

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In 2006-2007, Rothbauer conducted a study of the reading habits of rural teens. She set out to find whether place matters in the context of everyday reading. Four main themes emerged from the study: the physical proximity and everyday access to reading materials, the shifting visibility of the public library in the daily landscape of youth, the role of the internet as a place for reading, and the consistent lack of time for reading. Rothbauer found that the proximity of reading materials was essential to the interview participants’ everyday reading experiences, and concluded that the library has the opportunity to become the space for habitual reading.

The three methods used for data collection about teens’ reading habits moves from general environmental scans, to more specific observation, to the most specific interviewing which suggest an objective approach to the study due to the use of multiple methodologies. Environmental scans of the town and surrounding area provided appropriate context for the findings. It was noted that the single full service library in the town allows for a concentration of research activities. However, as some of the interviewees noted themselves, a single library can be limiting and restrictive in terms of operational hours and collection, which can have significant impact on reading habits. The environmental scans allowed for an understanding of the limitations of the participants’ access to both reading materials and space in which to read, which was a main component of Rothbauer’s question regarding whether reading practices are spatial.

The second method used was “unobtrusive participant observation” sessions where Rothbauer’s presence as an adult outsider was credible. Specific interviewees were not observed but sessions were conducted at the school library, public libraries, and retail stores that sold

reading materials. There are some ethical concerns with participant observation, particularly because those being observed were minors since the target age range for the study was youth and Rothbauer’s interview age range was 15 to 19 years old. While the study received ethics approval from the institutional review board at the University of Toronto, the data collected from the unobtrusive observation sessions did not have participant consent. Furthermore, unobtrusive observation is an unreliable method for data collection: how did the author accurately collect observational data about youth readers when age can be difficult to discern from a visual standpoint? Chosen reading materials is not necessarily indicative of age.

The main portion of data collection came from conversational, in-depth interviews with 27 youth aged 15 to 19. Purposive sampling, through adult gatekeepers such as teachers, parents and guardians, was used to ensure that the correct demographic of participants was interviewed. The environmental scans revealed that there were only 745 possible participants in the specific geographic location between the ages of 15 to 19, rendering non-random sampling necessary for the purposes of the study.

Allowing for the interviews to be informal conversations evolving with the participants’ answers encouraged the interviewer to ask questions not previously considered and permits the possibility of more information collected. By recording and later transcribing the interviews, thematic analysis was possible and allowed sections of interviews to be included in the article word for word. Rothbauer was able to find themes across the answers and draw useful conclusions, such as the library being defined by what it does not offer youth, while also being associated with happy childhood memories.

While Rothbauer ends the article with the idea that there is space for the library to fill in the everyday reading lives of youth, she offers no recommendations of how it may do so. She

notes that the lone teen reader is the norm among the interviewees and identifies the issues with teens finding reading materials based only on physical proximity. Would the library’s role then be to provide access to a reading community or increase awareness of additional reading materials? Should libraries be finding ways to bring reading materials to youth readers or encourage more library visits by extending operating hours? One of the questions asked of the interviewees related to where they find book recommendations: is that where libraries can fill a hole in the market?

If this study were repeated it would need to more seriously consider online reading. “Light news” (short-form media such as BuzzFeed articles or brand Snapchat stories) comprises a significant portion of everyday reading. Rothbauer dismisses online reading as “hardly reading”, an attitude that would render many teens as non-readers with the rise of e-readers and smartphones. It is unclear whether participants would have considered such reading as part of their daily reading habits.

Overall the study was well designed and the methodology appropriate and well used. The study set out to discover the connections between youths’ everyday reading habits and space, which it explored through four main themes. By using more than one methodology, Rothbauer ensured that she collected relevant background information without imposing generalizations onto the participants and the data. The study may be considered ethnographic since the author immersed herself in the environment through the scans and the unobtrusive participant observations. While there is room for additional research following the increased use of the internet for reading in the ten years since the study was conducted, it seems unlikely the findings would be very different.