

Introduction: Cultivating Taste in a Mass-Market World

Popularity, it must be remembered, has never been popular with the unpopular.

—HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE,
“ARE THE BEST-SELLERS WORTH READING?”
(NOVEMBER 1911)

The first page of the February 1902 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* proudly announced a new feature in response to “several hundreds” of readers’ requests to “tell us which among the books of to-day are really worth reading, and something of their authors.” The magazine’s editor promised that “[f]rom all that is published, Mr. [Hamilton Wright] Mabie, with his ripe judgment, will give each month his careful and competent advice as to which books are best worth while, and why.” The editor “confess[ed] to a special degree of pleasure” in making the announcement because Mabie was “one of the best-read men in the world of books,” a judgment supported by even “the most conservative literary critics.”¹ The *Journal* readers were clearly going to be well served. Presumably, Mabie would not recommend books too radical for his audience but would offer the requested guidance in navigating “the great flood of books currently issued by the publishers,” a flood in which “the average reader is totally dazed and swamped.”² While the request for advice suggests that the *Journal*’s audience recognized book reading as a desirable activity, it does not indicate that reading was regarded as *inherently* important or “worth while.” *Journal* readers hungered for books that would repay attention and time, but not necessarily those that were aesthetically superior. Indeed, the language of aesthetics has no presence in this announcement, and in its place we find only the language of economics. Worth, profit, and usefulness have become the markers of a good book.

A similar logic of literary value operates in a famous fictional scene of readership penned in the years just before this *Journal* issue appeared: the closing scene of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). In this scene, Carrie sits at a window in a lavish suite at the Waldorf hotel reading Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot*. Until now, she had read only popular historical romances or sensation novels, but she does respond, in her distinctive way, to *Goriot*: "It was so strong, and Ames' mere recommendation had so aroused her interest, that [she] caught nearly the full sympathetic significance of it. For the first time, it was being borne in upon her how silly and worthless had been her earlier reading, as a whole."³ Carrie feels that Ames is "far ahead of her" (SC, 257). She knows (it is her "saving grace," insists Dreiser) that Ames is "better educated than she [is]—that his mind [is] better" (SC, 256). And so, any book recommended by this "far-off" man, whose thoughts were "the right thing[s] to think," would necessarily be "better" in some inchoate way than the books she has already been reading, popular novels like Bertha M. Clay's *Dora Thorne* and Albert Ross's *Moulding a Maiden*.⁴ Carrie's appreciation of *Goriot* does not seem to extend to Balzac's social critique; she barely registers a response to the content of the novel. The strength of the novel resides almost exclusively in how it makes her perceive her other reading, which she now condemns as "silly and worthless." As Dreiser's insistent use of the language of finance—worth, interest, and profit—suggests, Carrie has dutifully followed Ames's recommendation because she is interested in the novel in the same way she is interested in fashion or in money itself: it is an outward sign of, and a means to, upward mobility.

For Carrie, as for the *Journal* readership, a trusted intellectual's advice opens the path to books. For both, the language of economics is superseded by the language of aesthetics in determining the literary text's "worth." Furthermore, neither Carrie nor the *Journal* readership reads solely, or even primarily, for comprehension of a particular work. Instead, the fact of having read the "best books" is in itself supposed to confer status upon the reader. That is, this new sort of reading is not intrinsically good; it is good because it is "better" than reading works that have no status and, thus, elevates the reader in a cultural and social hierarchy. The elision of aesthetic and economic value terms is common to both scenarios; in the logic of reading advice, economics masquerades as culture. The tacit promise is that some texts, like some mysterious alchemical lore, can make the reader wealthier; by demonstrating knowledge of these texts, one can trade on that knowledge to achieve wealth and elevated status. When

a reader approaches a text because experts have deemed it “the best” thing to read and reads in the interest of self-interest, that reader is “reading up.”

When reading up, one is reading the “right books,” dutifully, but not necessarily in the “right way.” For example, a reader might identify with characters not intended as the central figures of a text or might reject aspects of the text that do not reinforce the upward striving that brought the reader to the text in the first place. The entire nexus of literary culture at the beginning of the twentieth century looks different in light of the nascent logics of reading up. These logics also help explain the most intractable paradoxes that vex current scholarship about American literary realism. In the first place, the concept of reading up enables us to understand why some texts became popular best sellers despite their critique of, or even contempt for, popular tastes and ambitions. When reading is a means of upward mobility, readers might well respond idiosyncratically to elements in a text that are inconsistent with their assumptions and ambitions. The concept of reading up also helps us unpack the ways that criticism shifted under the dual pressures of a burgeoning middle-class reading audience and an increasingly stratified market for fiction. Although popularity seems antithetical to the world of elite literature, unpopularity usually brought economic ruin to publishers and writers. Elite authors and cultural arbiters saw that wooing larger audiences could ensure their own continued publication and employment, and playing into desires for cultural capital answered this necessity nicely.

If the reading up phenomenon I am describing sounds a lot like an element of “middlebrow culture,” as described by Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway, that is because it is the leading edge of what would become, by the 1920s, an unapologetically middling aesthetic. Reading up evinces among the middle class a status anxiety that would not be fully exorcised until the postwar period, when elitism became antithetical to respectability. Because reading up was so invested in the maintenance of cultural hierarchies, rather than in the blanket repudiation of disinterested and exclusive elites, it also helps us better understand the plasticity of the term *realism* as it was variously deployed in the American context. While it is certainly the case that various authors aligned themselves with or against the term to one degree or another throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, American literary realism was by no means an organized aesthetic project. And yet the notion of realism in literature had considerable cultural purchase, becoming a shorthand means of positioning oneself relative to a variety of aesthetic

assumptions. When it comes to the goals of reading up, however, all that mattered was the cultural capital accorded to works variously aligned with realism. In other words, “realism” from the perspective of reading up is an empty signifier. It is a brand and, ultimately, a term that signals a moment in the rhetorical production of a culture of taste within the culture of success in the newly industrializing United States in the beginning of the twentieth century. This culture of taste created a set of incentives for everyone involved—middle-class readers, who desired economic and social success; cultural arbiters, who hoped to remain relevant in the world of the mass media; and authors and publishers, who hoped to retain elite literary status for their works but who also, frankly, hoped to sell books. Each of these claimants had an ideological and material investment both in perpetuating the tensions at the heart of realism and in maintaining the apparent contradictions between realism and mass culture.

The Canny Advisor and the Desiring Reader

In any library that still holds dusty books from the 1880s through the 1910s on its shelves, the “bibliography” stacks house a dizzying array of volumes with titles like *Books and Reading; or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* by Noah Porter (1881); *What I Know about Books and How to Use Them*, by George C. Lorimer (1892); *Books, Culture, and Character*, by J. N. Larned (1906); and *Open That Door!* by Robert Sturgis Ingersoll (1916). Redeploying the rhetorics of upward mobility commonly associated with success manuals, the authors of reading manuals such as these counseled their middle-class audiences that all reading should redound to the benefit of the reader. During a time when self-help books like Orison Swett Marden’s *Pushing to the Front* could go through twelve printings in a year and Horatio Alger’s novels were enjoying a popular renaissance, it is hardly surprising that reading advice should also come to incorporate the material and social goals of success culture.⁵ By this point, the institutionalization of reading advice from intellectual experts already had a long history; guides for “young gentlemen” building their libraries, for college hopefuls, and for the moral education of young ladies date back at least to the second half of the sixteenth century, if not before.⁶ But the reading advice of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries differed in its direct appeal to a new generation of literary novices, people whose education had toppled the barrier of literacy but who had not been able to breach

the barrier of taste. The advice that appeared in book form, and therefore required a certain degree of familiarity with the bookstore or library, was targeted towards those who were financially stable, relatively well educated, and possessed of some leisure time within which to pursue the habit of reading. The audience, in other words, comprised members of a growing “professional-managerial class,” which Richard M. Ohmann characterizes as the increasingly well-defined middle class of industrial managers, who “hired employees who . . . managed money, the law, education, government agencies, and other key institutions of the new society” after 1900.⁷

As Hamilton Wright Mabie would write in his own contribution to the genre, *Books and Culture* (1896), the goal of reading manuals was to support and nurture the would-be reader’s conviction that “the great service [books] render us—the greatest service that can be rendered us—is the enlargement, enrichment, and unfolding of ourselves.”⁸ To purchase one of these manuals, or even to seek it out in a library, one would already need to be convinced of the worthiness of the reading enterprise and would certainly be prepared to dedicate considerable resources (time or finances) to improving one’s reading practice. How, though, might a casual reader, or even a nonreader, reach this advanced stage in the pursuit of literature? To answer this question, I suggest that we look at reading advice that someone might encounter incidentally, in the midst of other pursuits, as in the pages of the most widely circulated, most influential women’s lifestyle magazine of the early twentieth century, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. It is in such locations that the persuasive rhetorics of reading up become the least opaque, and the workings of ideology most clearly revealed. Though he has been lost to literary posterity, Mabie, the *Journal*’s reading advice columnist for a decade at the beginning of the mass-cultural era, is the direct ancestor of latter-day literary maven Oprah Winfrey. The reading attitudes Mabie fostered and helped codify were the condition of possibility for book series like Everyman’s Library and buying services like the Book-of-the-Month Club. His work has become part of the fabric of aspirational middlebrow culture, and his relative anonymity preserves the appearance of reading up as a natural inclination towards literature, even into the twenty-first century.

In the pages of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Mabie was reaching a much larger segment of the population than any book would, and his audience differed from a book audience because it included large numbers of the literarily uninitiated. He was certainly still writing to the group that would be interested in the reading manual (in fact, he frequently

recommends that his readers seek out essay collections by William Lyon Phelps, Arnold Bennett, and others), but he was also writing to people who did not yet have the wherewithal, or the time, to access the more genteel reading advice published in book form and available from bookstores and libraries. Mabie's columns would do double duty: first, as an advertisement for the reading habit, and second, as a guide to the book selection process for those already convinced of the desirability of frequent reading. In the latter capacity, Mabie spoke directly to the status anxieties in the new groups of readers who were caught by the wide net of the *Journal's* ubiquity and whose lives were increasingly framed by American consumer culture. Desire for consumable goods was "pumped into the American discourse at all levels" by the owners of department stores and by manufacturers; in the widening array of billboards, illustrated mail-order catalogs, and display windows; and, of course, in the pages of mass-market magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*.⁹ Even if Mabie never made any explicit concessions to the consumer mindset, his readers would very likely have read his recommendations in the light of the other editorial and advertising content of the magazine. For example, in the February 1902 issue, where his upcoming columns were announced, readers were presented with the life story of the actress Helena Modjeska and the lavishly illustrated "Summer Homes of Famous People."¹⁰ They could learn the proper form for party invitations and then what sorts of fashionable entertainments could be offered at a Valentine's Day party (and they were happy to hear that advice from "The Lady from Philadelphia" [34]). They could likewise learn in "Correct Speaking and Writing" the answers to numerous questions including whether it is appropriate to say one is "sick" or "ill" or whether it is redundant to write "limited to men of fashion only" (35). They might read both "What a Girl Does at College" (24) and "Why Bread Dough Sometimes Falls" (28). Fashion, though relegated to the back of the magazine, was a significant feature, represented by beautifully detailed illustrations in "The New Spring Bodices" (43) and "The Business Woman's Dress," but also in the practical article "Dressing Well on Small Means, Some Helps for the Woman Who Makes Her Own Clothes" (46).

The magazine's dominant ideal, in short, was respectable display, and it was this goal that Mabie had to address with his approach to reading advice. Mabie was charged by the *Journal* with guiding his readers to a taste that would confer the same kind of respectability that proper writing and speech, proper dress, or proper manners would, even to a taste that would enable his readers to appear as if they were denizens of the

highest cultural precincts of the time. And, indeed, in the columns he produced over the next ten years, literature would exist on a continuum with these other practices. As we shall see in the first chapter, “Mr. Mabie Tells What to Read,” Mabie was not the first books columnist for the magazine, but his tenure was by far the longest; he became a fixture in the magazine because he situated reading so successfully within the *Journal*’s zeitgeist.

Middlebrow Reading, Reception, and Identification

Reading advice in popular magazines, as one might expect, was somewhat different from that published in book form, primarily because the mass-market periodical was much more highly mediated by the consumer culture of success. In her history of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Janice Radway examines a number of reading manuals to describe the process by which elite desires to shore up the difference between “commercial books” and “literary books” led to the development of “a new genre of writing . . . that was devoted to the issue of how and what to read,” but one that finally, and ironically, “did so not by linking [‘literary books’] with leisurely meditation and reverent appreciation but by associating them with a more instrumental view that emphasized the benefits they conferred on the reader.”¹¹ Focusing closely on Noah Porter’s *Books and Reading* (1881), Radway finds the older ideals of concentrated, responsive reading giving way to a model of rigorous reading for the purpose of information gathering. But “information gathering,” while useful, does not satisfy the pleasure principle on which so much of consumer society is predicated. The reader who turns to books because they offer information is not going to form the “reading habit,” an easy and automatic rapport with books that makes reading the default option for a leisured hour.¹²

Radway’s work, along with Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Gordon Hutner’s *What America Read*, describes in large part the world that Mabie made. The attitudes on display in Mabie’s *Journal* columns become the ideologies of the 1920s through the 1960s, when, as Hutner writes, the middle class deployed itself behind a notion of “standards” to protect against “avant-garde rebellion” on the one side and “the combined forces of aristocratic and mass culture to authorize status” on the other.¹³ Hutner’s and Rubin’s middlebrow readers, sharing the same goals as Mabie’s readers, turned against “elite” literature in favor of works like Booth Tarkington’s, which celebrated middle-class life.

But they did so with the Mabiean mind-set: that reading literature would be improving and ultimately profitable. Just two decades earlier, Mabie and his readers were still comfortable with the highbrow as a category worthy of pursuit. At the same time, a growing body of literature—the very “Howellsian realism” that Hutner excavates in the twenties—intermingled with the highbrow offerings in uncomplicated and largely undifferentiated fashion in Mabie’s pages. These *Journal* columns provide an essential prehistory to the postwar middlebrow explosion and the concomitant modernist rebellion against “genteel” literature of all stripes. Radway terms “the scandal of the middlebrow” the process by which literature was sold as “Culture, thereby baldly exposing its prior status as a form of capital—symbolic capital, to be sure—but capital nonetheless.”¹⁴ Careful attention to the case study of Mabie in the beginning of the century allows us to see the foundations of the strategy Book-of-the-Month Club editor Harry Scherman and his successors would pursue; they were simply monetizing what had already been explicitly marketed as symbolic capital by a previous cycle of cultural arbiters.

While we can know a good deal about Mabie, and about who Mabie and his editors in the *Journal* thought would be reading his columns, from the text of the columns themselves, discerning with any further certainty who those readers were and what they made of either Mabie’s advice or the books they subsequently read is a trickier proposition. After the mid-nineteenth century, reading became primarily a private practice, performed silently by individuals and leaving very few traces that one can document historically.¹⁵ The lives of most nonprofessional readers remain unpreserved by the archive. Still, as James L. Machor contends in his introduction to *Readers in History*, it is possible to learn something of these readers through a process of reconstruction that sees reception as “a product of the relationship among particular interpretive strategies, epistemic frames, ideological imperatives, and social orientations of readers as members of historically specific—and historiographically specified—interpretive communities.” Literary texts also hold clues for historians of reception, Machor continues, because we can map “the way literary texts construct the reader’s role through strategies necessitated and even produced by particular historical conditions.”¹⁶ Machor’s model is particularly useful for my purposes because it allows for the recognition of the dialogic relationship among readers, texts, and critics that sustains the culture of advice.

Indeed, as we recognize the mutual influence of readers, texts, and advisers, we must continue to move beyond a simple notion of consumption

as assimilation, in which, as Michel de Certeau phrases it, “‘assimilating’ necessarily means ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, and not ‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one’s own, appropriating or reappropriating it.”¹⁷ To acknowledge the creativity of the consumer is not altogether to reject the notion that cultural formations may have an influence on the reader, but it does require us to recognize that within the nexus of cultural formations the reader is selectively, variously, and unpredictably influenced. This understanding is not unlike the one Jonathan Rose reaches in his study of working-class autodidacticism in Victorian-era England. But, while much of Rose’s influential study relies on a caution against thinking of the working- or middle-class reader as influenced by elite cultural arbiters in the choice of reading material—what William J. Gilmore calls the “trickle-down” hypothesis—the idea that the working-class autodidact was able to “somehow . . . discover the classics on his own” seems to ignore the process by which the classics became the classics; they certainly did not do so without some help from tastemakers, and somewhere along the line Rose’s autodidacts would need to have imbibed the notion of what the classics were.¹⁸ At the same time, I take very much to heart the insistence that no reader of reading advice is going to follow a program of reading precisely as it is laid out by an expert, even a beloved and trusted expert. In other words, a more complicated picture must emerge, in which readers both explore on their own and are influenced by the cultural productions of the elites.

A dynamic that allowed for both obedience and creativity along these lines was the readerly process of identification. While the hermeneutics of “reading up” involve a process of identification akin to that of sentimentality, the requirements for the “reading up” reader’s identifications are much more fluid. When we talk about identification in sentimental or romantic texts from the nineteenth century, we typically mean a process through which the reader identifies with a suffering character such as a woman in distress or a slave. Through such sympathetic identifications, the reader comes to an understanding either of the suffering figure’s essential humanity or of his or her own capacity for fellow feeling. While there are nearly as many definitions of sentimentality as there are critics discussing Anglo-American literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the process of sympathetic identification is always a part of any discussion of the mode. Anglo-American sentimentality, as June Howard explains, has its roots in the moral philosophies of Lockean thinkers whose attempts to explain the existence of benevolence in a rationalist world led them to sympathy, and sympathetic identification,

as the location of virtue. Howard demonstrates that, in particular, Adam Smith's discussion of the imagination's role in identification paved the way for the mode of sentimentality in literature and for the use of sympathy as a training ground for the emotions.¹⁹ But this sympathetic model of identification relies on the abjection of the subject being identified with and can very easily lead to what Saidiya V. Hartman terms the "violence of identification," in which the identifying reader/observer, "in making the other's suffering one's own," actually "occludes" that suffering, a process that ultimately leads to "the other's obliteration."²⁰

The self-identifications of Hartman's self-centered reader are precisely the goals of the "reading up" reader. As Jesse Lee Bennett, the candid author of *What Books Can Do FOR YOU*, wrote in 1923: "The enjoyment which comes from fiction arises from this basic fact—one temporarily identifies one's self with the hero and has one's life vividly enlarged and clarified through his experience. If this identification does not take place there is no enjoyment."²¹ A reader need not even identify with the hero of the novel; he or she might identify instead with an imagined author, as projected through "friendly authorial narrators" who "invited their readers to participate imaginatively in the life experience, the moral vision, and the aesthetic process through which they shaped the represented world of the text," as Barbara Hochman has found in her study of reading practices in the age of literary realism.²² Such creative and self-interested misreading took place even among trained readers in the period before mass-marketed reading advice, as evidenced by Barbara Sicherman's study of the Hamilton family of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Examining the family's diaries and correspondence, Sicherman finds that the Hamiltons' intense involvement with reading "provided both the occasion for self-creation and the narrative form from which they might reconstruct themselves"; their reading led to career aspirations, and the women of the family were idiosyncratic with respect to the identifications they formed with the characters in the novels they read.²³

Sicherman reads the Hamiltons as symptomatic of a Victorian reading culture in which women, in particular, "found in reading an occasion that, by removing them from their usual activities, permitted the formulation of future plans or, more generally, encouraged vital engagement with the world, a world many thought would be transformed by women's special sensibilities."²⁴ The Hamiltons favored Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, the Brontës, and Louisa May Alcott, unsurprisingly—their tastes generally trended, as did the tastes of most respectable readers of the nineteenth century, towards the romance or the more genteel

end of the sentimental canon. They enjoyed literary magazines, such as *Harper's*, and occasionally admitted to one another desires to read more sensational fiction, designated "trash," for the purpose of diversion. The Hamiltons, in other words, were creative misreaders despite their comfort with the texts they were reading and their enfranchisement in the world of letters. Their desires for sentimental identification were validated by the texts themselves and by the highbrow literary magazines to which they subscribed.²⁵ Their extended family functioned as a support network for their well-formed reading habit, and they were engaged frequently in social reading and in dialogue about the texts they encountered.²⁶

How much more likely is it that a reader newly arrived to the realm of the novel, or more specifically to a highbrow novel to which he or she had been directed by a reading adviser, would perform whatever interpretive gymnastics necessary to assimilate that novel to his or her own motivations for reading it in the first place? In the pages that follow, I refer to this kind of work as "misreading," terming it thus as a nod to generally accepted readings that purport to follow the "intentions" of an author or the "truth" of a text. Stanley Fish, Steven Mailloux, Tony Bennett, and James L. Machor have all addressed the concept of misreading, in all cases asserting the contingent nature of reception and asserting the necessity of understanding reading contexts in order to discern and comprehend reception—for Fish, "interpretive communities"; for Mailloux, "rhetorical practices"; and for Bennett, "reading formations."²⁷ To talk about "reading formations," Bennett writes, is to "attempt to identify the determinations that, in operating on both texts and readers, mediate the relations between text and context, connecting the two and providing the mechanisms through which they productively interact in representing context, not as a set of extradiscursive relations, but as a set of intertextual and discursive relations that produce readers for texts and texts for readers."²⁸ The mutual imbrication of text and reader that emerges in Bennett's formulation is the phenomenon I hope to capture by retaining the term *misreading*—the notion that there is a proper reading of a text is never far away from either Mabie or his readers, nor do they attempt wholly to ignore or usurp it, but their own readings supersede that notion in their own practice and reception because of particular, material considerations and preferences. As a professional critic, I cannot help but be aware of the "proper" reading that is determined by my own reading formation; it is against such readings, and counter to readings offered by authors themselves, that I posit accounts of reading up. Bennett's notion

of reading formations is also useful for this study because it acknowledges, and provides a means of describing, the material and disciplinary pressures at work in any act of interpretation, along with the historically contingent aspects of reception: "The relations between textual phenomena and social and political processes can be theorized adequately only by placing in suspension the text as it appears to be given to us in our own reading formation so as to be able to analyze the differential constitution and functioning of that apparently same but different text within different reading formations."²⁹ By reconstructing the reading formation that is produced by, and that produced demand for, Mabie's columns in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, we can access interpretive possibilities that are canny, strategic, instrumental misreadings of resistant texts.

Anxious Authors, Unruly Audiences

The authors whose works this study addresses were all aware of, and largely disdainful of, trends in the interpretations and reception of their work. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the most self-consciously highbrow literature, if not the most popular literature, tended to be produced by authors who identified or were identified with the aesthetics of realism. Recent scholarship, most notably Christopher P. Wilson's, has made great advances in our understanding of realism's imbrication with the burgeoning professionalization of the middle class; as I discuss below, realist authors largely thought of themselves as professionals in relation to their literary output, and their texts were intimately concerned with the dynamics of a culture of professionalism.³⁰ And yet that professionalization did not take the form of a comfortable embrace of popular reading; instead, realist authors were largely uncomfortable with the conditions of possibility for their profession: a large, and largely unprofessional, reading audience. Since Mabie's primary job in the *Journal* was to make reading "the best books" palatable to and profitable for his readers, he needed to render realist literature attractive and accessible despite its frequent hostility to the American consumer-driven culture of success. This would require ideological concessions from Mabie and practical concessions from his readers, as both parties were temperamentally inclined towards the modes against which realism strove to define itself: sentimentality and the romance. As we shall see, these concessions involved the strategic selection of texts and a degree of interpretive creativity or—as many realist authors would see it—misreading, even interpretive violence.