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RECOMMENDED READING:  
BOOK LIST BOOKS AND MIDDLEBROW TASTEMAKING

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Cheryl A. Read

May 2021

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Cheryl A. Read

2021

RECOMMENDED READING:

BOOK LIST BOOKS AND MIDDLEBROW TASTEMAKING

By

Cheryl A. Read

Approved February 8, 2021

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## ABSTRACT

### RECOMMENDED READING:

#### BOOK LIST BOOKS AND MIDDLEBROW TASTEMAKING

By

Cheryl A. Read

May 2021

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Greg Barnhisel

The term “middlebrow” has historically been hurled as a pejorative to signify cultural objects and consumers of them which are watered down, inauthentic, and invested in quick social gain. I argue that the literary middlebrow can be better understood if its definition expands to include a mode of reading characterized by being mediated by cultural arbiters and purposeful in that literature functions as an instrument for self-improvement. In this dissertation, I use book list books, lists of recommended reading published as standalone books themselves, to trace the history of a middlebrow mode of reading from the late nineteenth century to the present. While the mediation of and purposes for middlebrow reading have been shaped by the educational trends and historical concerns of each generation, the purposeful and mediated nature of the middlebrow mode of reading has endured.

## DEDICATION

For Steven and Everett.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Above all, I would like to thank my parents, who made sure I had glasses and library books when I was a bookish girl and childcare and a place to stay when I was a stressed dissertation writer. Finally, to my husband, Steven, and my son, Everett, who have sacrificed so much for this dream alongside me. I can't wait to see what our next adventure will be.

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## Introduction

Many, I believe, are deterred from attempting what are called stiff books for fear they should not understand them; but there are few who need complain of the narrowness of their minds, if only they would do their best with them.

—Sir John Lubbock, “The Hundred Best Books”

Take a trip to the mall, and step inside its big-box bookstore, the one that shuttered independent booksellers across America at the turn of the twenty-first century and is now itself threatened by online retailers. Walk past the espresso bar, the readerly gifts, the children’s train table, and the rows of glossy magazines. Although most of the few bookshelves that remain are now devoted to young adult novels, beach reads, bestsellers, and self-improvement, one or two of them hold a modern curiosity. Here, near the fiction backlist, you will find lists of recommended reading, published as hardcover and trade paperback books themselves. One of these, *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*, is especially likely to command attention, perhaps because of its bold type, or perhaps because of its heft from nearly one thousand pages printed in full color.

Although some of these book list books have been in print for decades, more are published each year. The alarm is constantly being sounded for the death of publishing, the death of books, and the death of reading, so why are time and resources continuing to be devoted to the production of book list books when similar content is readily available online? It has long been impossible to read everything worth reading within a single lifetime, so for the past century and half, readers have turned to book list books like these to help shape their own reading. In this dissertation, I examine the humble book list book, which influences the reading of countless readers outside of the classroom, from the late

nineteenth century to the present, considering what this niche genre may reveal about middlebrow reading practices.

### Defining the Literary Middlebrow

In 1925, British humor and satire magazine *Punch* declared, “the B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow’. It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.”<sup>1</sup> This early definition focuses on the middlebrow person as distastefully aspirational. Rather than engaging with culture for its own sake, *Punch* suggests that middlebrows spend their time on cultural objects that will benefit them socially. Subsequent descriptions of the middlebrow are likewise derogatory. In a 1932 letter that was only published posthumously, Virginia Woolf famously describes the middlebrow as “betwixt and between,” mixing the pursuit of art and life with capitalism and disrespecting the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow.<sup>2</sup> Woolf considers the highbrow and lowbrow to be “authentic,” with easily recognizable motivations in their production and consumption of art, whereas the middlebrow’s cultural diet is influenced by an interest in social advancement. Woolf’s middlebrow is parasitic, snatching elements from both highbrow and lowbrow in order to fabricate something completely lacking authenticity. Taking up the term “midcult” to describe this phenomenon in 1962, Dwight Macdonald expresses a similar concern for the deception he sees as inherent in middlebrow culture, which he believes “pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes

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1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “middlebrow,” accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/252048?redirectedFrom=middlebrow>.

2. Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow,” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 180. For a discussion of Woolf’s relationship with intellectualism and the common reader, see Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

them.”<sup>3</sup> From both Woolf’s perspective in the United Kingdom and Macdonald’s perspective in the United States, the middlebrow is dangerous because it is comprised of an inferior cultural product disguised as highbrow. As these early cultural critics demonstrate, in the first half of the twentieth century, the middlebrow was nearly always hurled as an insult rather than embraced as an identifier. In fact, these early voices shaped our understanding of middlebrow culture for years to come. Trysh Travis notes in “Print and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture” that

the vivid illustrations and authoritative rhetorical stances of the critics who coined and popularized the term “middlebrow” have meant that their *opinions*—which have been overwhelmingly negative—have been taken as *facts*. Consequently, much of our understanding of middlebrow culture, or of what we might call the culture of the educated middle class, has been skewed almost past the point of objective analysis.<sup>4</sup>

In the late twentieth century, the emerging field of middlebrow studies began to examine the middlebrow with some critical distance, considering the ways in which the middlebrow provides a wide audience with access to culture and blurs previous distinctions between high and low.

Middlebrow scholarship largely situates the origins of the middlebrow in the decades after World War I, a time in which Americans with access to culture were invested in providing a wide audience with that access. In her groundbreaking *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Joan Shelley Rubin identifies a wide variety of ways in which literary culture was packaged so that many people, especially those in the middle class,

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3. Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult & Midcult,” in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain*, ed. John Summers, New York Review Books Classics (1960; New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 35.

4. Trysh Travis, “Print and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture,” in *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 358.

could access and understand it. These included the Great Books project, Book-of-the-Month Club, outline summaries, and literary radio programming. Underlying the production of these cultural objects was the belief that everyone, not only the upper classes, could benefit from reading and understanding the texts in the literary canon.<sup>5</sup> Although these aims may seem like the height of cultural democracy in the United States, a country that ostensibly values equality, Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith note in the introduction to their *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* that middlebrow cultural arbiters have frequently been critiqued for their attempts to standardize the literary choices of a large, heterogeneous reading public for capitalist gain.<sup>6</sup> These critiques are evident in early writing on the middlebrow by writers like Woolf and Macdonald, but they oversimplify the motivations of cultural arbiters and effects of the literary middlebrow.

The literary middlebrow blurs the line between high and low by staking out a middle space that questions the legitimacy of cultural categories—and their stakeholders—to begin with. As Lawrence W. Levine notes in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, cultural categories and hierarchies are always shifting, perhaps most notably in the example of Shakespeare's work moving from mass culture experience intertwined with singing, dancing, and other performance to high culture performed in hushed theatres over the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> The middlebrow is

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5. Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 30.

6. Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds., *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 4.

7. Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), chap. 1.

especially prone to change over time,<sup>8</sup> making it a difficult term to define accurately. Botshon and Goldsmith encapsulate the difficulty of clearly defining the middlebrow as a cultural category when they write that “it has most often been defined by what it is not: lacking the cachet and edginess of high culture, the middlebrow has also been perceived to be in want of the authenticity of the low.”<sup>9</sup> Even as the middlebrow is often identified by what it lacks, it also borrows heavily from highbrow and lowbrow culture. This, Janice A. Radway argues in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, her extensive analysis of the Book-of-the-Month Club, is the true “scandal of the middlebrow”: the middlebrow was not a new, clearly delineated cultural category in and of itself, but rather a nebulous formation that emerged from the intermingling of culture and commerce, high and low.<sup>10</sup>

Writing that is typically classified as middlebrow fiction provides a good example of how the literary middlebrow is regarded in relation to other cultural categories. Middlebrow fiction is often disdained as “bad” fiction, suggesting that middlebrow writers attempt to create literature that meets highbrow standards and fall short, instead producing watered-down fiction that appeals to a broad reading public because it can be easily understood.<sup>11</sup> In *America the Middlebrow: Women’s Novels, Progressivism, and*

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8. Russell Lynes illustrates this rapid change in his 1979 afterword to *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste*. In it, he notes that his famous 1949 *Life* magazine chart of objects and activities aligning with each brow no longer accurately represents these cultural divisions. What was previously highbrow had become upper middlebrow, and what was upper middlebrow had become lower middlebrow. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (1954; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1980), 352.

9. Botshon and Goldsmith, *Middlebrow Moderns*, 3.

10. Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 152.

11. Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 6. Dwight Macdonald certainly takes up this criticism in “Masscult & Midcult,”

*Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars*, Jaime Harker opposes this passive perspective of the middlebrow, arguing that middlebrow writing is done “by design, not by default.”<sup>12</sup> Harker sees these authors as focused on connecting with their readers, leading them to craft and publish middlebrow fiction in ways that will best enable those connections rather than following the paths of authors who prioritized aesthetic innovation or mass appeal.<sup>13</sup> As a result of these differing values in middlebrow fiction, in *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars*, Faye Hammill establishes a need to readjust scholarly analysis of middlebrow fiction to recognize that its experimentation is different from, but not lesser than, modernist writing in that its seemingly straightforward surface, written to appeal to a wide audience, often holds “unexpected depths and subtleties” and has been “persistently gendered feminine, with a belittling and exclusionary intention.”<sup>14</sup> Hammill’s call to action recognizes that analytical frameworks for one kind of literature do not necessarily apply to others: different types of literature require different types of analysis. In fact, the blending and borrowing of the middlebrow both changes the way we look at existing categories and questions whether those categories were valid or significant in the first place. The middlebrow, like other cultural categories, is unstable, changing over time and blurring the distinctions between itself and other categories.

It is important to note that, for scholars studying the literary middlebrow, both women writers and women readers have been important areas of critical concern. In fact, an

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where he describes midcult as a wolf in sheep’s clothing: midcult pretends to be something that it is not, damaging its audience by masquerading as high culture. Macdonald, “Masscult & Midcult,” 35-36.

12. Jaime Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women’s Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 18.

13. Harker, *America the Middlebrow*, 19.

14. Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture*, 6.

emphasis on women has been present since Q.D. Leavis noted in 1932 that “women rather than men change the books (that is, determine the family reading),”<sup>15</sup> thus making them powerful literary consumers. Despite, or perhaps because of, this power in the marketplace, books that women tended to read and write were often scorned and pejoratively labeled “middlebrow.” This has led scholars such as Nicola Humble, Lisa Botshon, Meredith Goldsmith, Elizabeth Long, Faye Hammill and Jaime Harker to argue for a serious academic consideration of the middlebrow in order to examine the women readers and writers that history considered unimportant.<sup>16</sup> Beth Driscoll encapsulates the issue by writing that the literary middlebrow is not only written by and for women, but also

feminized because this predominance of women has led to the middlebrow being degraded in gendered terms. The feminization of middlebrow culture is not simply descriptive but also derogatory. Women’s participation in book clubs or author events leads to the perception that these are women’s activities, deterring men from participating and lowering the status of these activities.<sup>17</sup>

When I refer to the feminized middlebrow throughout this dissertation, I do so in consideration of the gender identification of producers and consumers as well as the way that texts and reading practices associated with women tend to have a lower status.

Issues of race and ethnicity have rarely been centered in middlebrow scholarship in the same way as gender. Even scholarship on Oprah’s Book Club, which I will discuss in

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15. Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; repr., London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1965), 22.

16. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Botshon and Goldsmith, *Middlebrow Moderns*; Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars*; Harker, *America the Middlebrow*.

17. Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 29.

Chapters 2 and 3, typically take the perspective that Oprah’s audience “transcends class and race boundaries.”<sup>18</sup> Notable exceptions that do focus on specific racial or ethnic demographics within the larger middlebrow include Christina Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, Belinda Edmondson’s *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class*, passages in Gordon Hutner’s *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960*, and Mary Unger’s “The Book Circle: Black Women Readers and Middlebrow Taste in Chicago, 1943–1953.” However, extensive analysis of the middlebrow in relation to the race or ethnicity of producers and consumers largely remains an area of opportunity.<sup>19</sup>

Middlebrow scholarship largely draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu for its conceptual framework. This has been a useful starting point for the field, but scholars have increasingly modified Bourdieu’s model to better reflect an evolving conception of the middlebrow. Bourdieu’s field of cultural production provides a relational model for understanding works of art, including literature. This model considers the literary field in relation to the other social elements with which it is intertwined and literary works in relation to the competing interests of cultural authority and economic power.<sup>20</sup> The middlebrow blends together both of these interests, bringing an air of cultural authority to

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18. Timothy Richard Aubry, “Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for *Paradise on The Oprah Winfrey Show*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 2 (2006): 352, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2006.0041>

19. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Mary Unger, “The Book Circle: Black Women Readers and Middlebrow Taste in Chicago, 1943–1953,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 11, no. 1 (2019): 4–20, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.11.1.0004>

20. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), chap. 1.



a wide audience.<sup>21</sup> For Bourdieu, the middlebrow is fully connected to the middle class: a cultural object becomes middlebrow only when the middle class engages with it.<sup>22</sup> While Bourdieu's model may be accurate within late-twentieth-century French society, it has limitations when applied to other cultures with less rigid class structures, greater racial diversity, and no officially sanctioned high culture or protectors of language such as the United States. Furthermore, Bourdieu's relational understanding of the middlebrow means that there is nothing intrinsic in a cultural object that can lead to its categorization as middlebrow. As a result, the "brow" of a cultural object can shift over time: a book that was originally considered highbrow will become middlebrow when adopted by a middle-class audience. A relational understanding of the middlebrow is useful in considering the social complexities of cultural objects, but it is an ultimately unstable means of categorization because the brow of a cultural object shifts over its life cycle.

Middlebrow scholars have recently begun to recognize that existing brow categories do not accurately represent the complexities of reading. For example, the middlebrow is oftentimes conflated with the middle class, but research like Jonathan Rose's landmark studies on working-class readers indicates that class and education level do not necessarily map onto what readers choose to read or their ability to read it. Rose found that working-class readers can be just as moved by and motivated to read canonical texts as more educated readers, though they may approach these texts differently.<sup>23</sup> Rose

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21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Routledge Classics (1979; London: Routledge, 2010), 321-24.

22. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 327-28.

23. Jonathan Rose, "Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 1 (1992): 47-70 accessed February 27, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2709910>

therefore calls for a reassessment of the “trickle-down effect” of culture from the elite to the masses and urges scholars to refrain from underestimating the common reader’s level of comprehension.<sup>24</sup> In his *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, Victor Nell extends this reassessment by critiquing the traditional narrative in which readers’ tastes evolve as they become more educated. Nell insists that there are no identifiable classes of reader because “the doors from high culture to low remain open, and earlier tastes do not wither and die as more refined appetites develop.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, even those who have access to education and develop taste for what might be considered highbrow texts are still able—and even likely—to read texts that may be considered popular and lowbrow. Barbara Herrnstein Smith refers to the assumption that people’s tastes change in a predicatable progression over their lifetimes as a “developmental fallacy” and suggests that this is not the case for most people.<sup>26</sup> A discussion of “guilty pleasures” among any group of literary scholars will confirm Nell’s assertion, and Jim Collins’ study of Amazon lists further quantifies it. Collins compared lists developed for Advanced Placement high school students and women who listened to National Public Radio in order to understand two different stages in similar readers’ educational development, presuming that the same readers who were in Advanced Placement classes would develop into National Public Radio listeners with time and education. When he found the same texts on both lists, Collins then questioned whether

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24. Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

25. Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 5.

26. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 79-81.

taste does indeed develop alongside education.<sup>27</sup> Instead, as Nell also argues, these lists suggest that readers may retain their previous tastes while also developing new tastes. In her introduction to *Reading in America: Literature & Social History*, Cathy Davidson provides a simple explanation for these complex readerly identities: “an individual can participate in more than one reading community and can have different strategies and purposes in different situations.”<sup>28</sup> Readers, like books, are too complicated to categorize at face value. Because of these complexities, there is no objective and lasting way to identify an individual as a middlebrow reader or a book as a middlebrow book, so scholars must instead broaden the definition of the literary middlebrow.

In her 2011 *Modernist Cultures* article, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading,” Nicola Humble provides an alternative definition, suggesting that the literary middlebrow is located not in the identity of the reader or the nature of the text, but rather in the context of the reading, specifically in the reading posture. For Humble, highbrow reading is associated with professional reading and is done sitting at a desk while annotating. In contrast, middlebrow reading is leisure reading and is done in a comfortable, reclined position.<sup>29</sup> Encapsulating her argument, Humble writes, “the battle of the brows can, on one level, be seen simply as a matter of sitting forward or sitting

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27. Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 78. Although Collins focuses on a list aimed at women readers, his analysis here deals with how the same book appears on different lists rather than on female readership.

28. Cathy N. Davidson, “Toward a History of Books and Readers,” in *Reading in America: Literature & Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 17.

29. Nicola Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading,” *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 47-48, accessed February 10, 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/mod.2011.0004>

back.”<sup>30</sup> This interesting development in the evolving definition of the literary middlebrow responds to some of the complications with establishing categories located around texts and readers. In analyzing responses to the Mass Observation reading survey conducted in 1937, Humble finds, like Nell, Collins, and Davidson, that “most people were not ‘highbrows’ or ‘middlebrows’: rather, ‘serious’ and ‘leisured’ reading practices were moved between by individual readers according to time, circumstance and mood.”<sup>31</sup> Humble’s focus on reading posture as a criterion for brow is compelling but also limited in terms of its application, as scholars have little means of accessing the historical—or even contemporary—reader’s posture while reading. Humble’s work can and should be expanded to understand other facets of reading practices that readers may move between, providing a fuller definition of the literary middlebrow.

### **The Literary Middlebrow as a Mode of Reading**

As scholars have increasingly recognized, criteria for classifying texts and readers are constantly changing in response to their environment, so locating the literary middlebrow exclusively in the identities of texts or readers, which is the approach the vast majority of middlebrow scholarship takes, can be problematic. Lawrence W. Levine shows throughout *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* that cultural categories are difficult to define because their boundaries have always been permeable and shifting rather than fixed.<sup>32</sup> Russell Lynes illustrates one of these shifts in the context of the middlebrow when he reflects in 1979 upon a chart that he developed

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30. Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back,” 47.

31. Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back,” 53.

32. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

for a 1949 issue of *Life* magazine. In this now well-known chart, Lynes helps readers pinpoint their own “brow” based on their taste in entertainment, philanthropy, furniture, and even salad. The chart is very much in line with the popular magazine quiz, but its specificity lends it a scientific quality. However, looking back upon the chart, Lynes finds that “what was highbrow then has become distinctly upper middlebrow today.”<sup>33</sup> In just thirty years, these seemingly clear-cut cultural categories have been completely upended. The fact that cultural categories can change so rapidly and also have far from clear distinctions between them within a given time period makes me think that something is missing when the literary middlebrow is located exclusively in the text or in the reader.

I suggest that we can extend our understanding of the literary middlebrow to include a mode of reading that can be employed by different readers and engaged by the same individual reader to read different texts. This is a logical development of Janice Radway’s “middlebrow personalist habit of mind,” in which Book-of-the-Month Club selections were “a range of books that could alike scale modern problems to the measure of individual selves,” made with the perspective that reading is “an event for identification, connection, and response” in which the reader “was to inhabit the parallel self provided by a book.”<sup>34</sup> My concept of the middlebrow mode of reading also fleshes out Timothy Aubry’s brief but insightful statement in “Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for *Paradise* on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*”: “it is important, however, to approach the notion of middlebrow as a tactical, if sometimes automatic, mode of reading

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33. Lynes, *The Tastemakers*, 352.

34. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 283-85.

rather than as a fixed identity.”<sup>35</sup> As Aubry notes by describing the middlebrow mode of reading as “sometimes automatic,” engaging in middlebrow reading may or may not be a conscious choice—readers will sometimes engage in a middlebrow mode of reading without actively making the decision to do so. Additionally, some people, perhaps those typically thought of as middlebrow because they are women or from a middle class background, may be more inclined to engage in a middlebrow mode of reading than others, though this mode is available to most readers. Similarly, some texts may lend themselves to a middlebrow mode of reading more than others, though many texts can be read in a middlebrow manner. When readers engage in a middlebrow mode of reading, their reading is purposeful and mediated.

In this dissertation, I define a middlebrow mode of reading as purposeful in that literature functions as an instrument for self-improvement. Both highbrow and lowbrow reading can be characterized as reading for the sake of reading: highbrow to appreciate aesthetic craftsmanship, and lowbrow to escape into another world.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, middlebrow reading is done for neither aesthetic appreciation (such as admiring the formal innovations of modernist poetry) nor utilitarian use value (such as reading a new appliance’s instruction manual). Rather, middlebrow reading is reading with a purpose. As Trysh Travis notes, “critics scoffed at readers who read for what they believed were the wrong reason: for moral instruction, or emotional identification, or, worst of all, to prove they possessed the cultural capital required for membership in the new middle

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35. As I mentioned previously, Aubry, like other scholars writing on Oprah, sees Oprah’s audience as one that “transcends class and race boundaries.” He does discuss the role of race in the novel and the televised discussion later in the article, but here his discussion of a middlebrow mode of reading does not address race. Aubry, “Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow,” 352-53.

36. Woolf, “Middlebrow,” 177-78.

class.”<sup>37</sup> Middlebrow purposes for reading may not be sanctioned by its critics, but that does not make them any less valid or worthy of study, especially when so many common readers over the past century have engaged in reading for precisely these purposes.

In the early twentieth century, middlebrow purposes for reading were closely connected to class mobility and gaining cultural capital. This element of the middlebrow is frequently identified in the scholarship on texts and readers. Writing about the Modern Library series, Lise Jaillant finds that the professional-managerial class that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century used culture to legitimate themselves as members of the new middle class.<sup>38</sup> Belinda Edmondson uses the term “aspirational” to indicate that “what people read reflects not just who they are (in terms of socioeconomic status) but who they *wish* to be,” so middlebrow literature “may reflect the desire for higher class status—or the reconciliation of middle-class and working-class status.”<sup>39</sup> In her study of Hamilton Wright Mabie’s early twentieth-century book recommendations in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Amy Blair coins the term “reading up” to describe “reading with an eye to social advancement, with the hope of material advancement.”<sup>40</sup> I suggest that this purpose for middlebrow reading can be applied to not only the texts that are read and the individuals who read, but also to a mode of reading that can be engaged. For example, a reader might use Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book*, a text I discuss in Chapter 1, to read for the purpose of gaining a liberal education and the associated cultural capital but

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37. Travis, “Print and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture,” 359.

38. Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 8.

39. Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, 11.

40. Amy L. Blair, *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 171.

may also read genre fiction for pleasure. This reader's "brow" may be difficult to categorize because of this variety in their reading. Instead, we can assess this reader as sometimes engaging in a purposeful middlebrow mode of reading to gain cultural capital.

Over the course of the twentieth century, as class mobility became easier and more of the population went to college, reading for the purpose of gaining cultural capital gradually faded away. Its place was taken by reading literature to find its relevance to the reader's life.<sup>41</sup> Like the reading done by Erin A. Smith's "life application method readers," who used the Bible as a practical self-help book for their daily lives,<sup>42</sup> those who engage in middlebrow reading look for ways to identify with what they read and apply something from it to their own lives. By the early twenty-first century, the application purpose for middlebrow reading reaches its apex in the marketing of literature as bibliotherapy, which I discuss in Chapter 3, suggesting that books can "heal what ails you." In this period, middlebrow reading functions primarily as a means for inward self-improvement rather than class mobility.

What is puzzling about a definition of the middlebrow centered on labeling texts and readers is the huge number of products, considered to be middlebrow, intended to help average folks, also considered to be middlebrow, understand the great cultural works. If a person is labeled as a middlebrow, how can their reading of highbrow texts be explained? This is where the middlebrow mode of reading proves especially useful. Guidance for

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41. I am grateful to Melanie Ho, whose dissertation preface discussion of the disconnect between Stanley Fish as professional reader and an audience of educated but nonprofessional readers helped me think through how to articulate this shift. Melanie Ho, "Useful Fiction: Why Universities Need Middlebrow Literature" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

42. Erin A. Smith, *What Would Jesus Read?: Popular Religious Books and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 11-12.



middlebrow reading comes in the form of mediation by a cultural arbiter. This cultural arbiter tells readers what they should read for their intended purposes. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, books have been widely available, so readers have access to texts that will suit their purposes but need substantial mediation to sift through everything that is available and find it. Additionally, cultural arbiters oftentimes tell readers how to approach reading a text or what to think about what they have read (though of course it is up to the readers whether they will follow instructions<sup>43</sup>). All forms of reading involve some level of mediation, but as Beth Driscoll notes, “middlebrow mediators are particularly visible” because the middlebrow’s interests are simultaneously cultural and capitalist.<sup>44</sup> While other types of reading may involve book recommendation that shapes what a reader reads and how they read it, middlebrow reading places the cultural arbiter at the center, serving as a guide for the reader’s purposeful reading.

Middlebrow mediation can take many forms from literary shows on the radio, television, and YouTube to book clubs to digests that summarize works in easily digestible bites so that readers don’t have to slog through the original text. The common feature of middlebrow mediation is that it does not enable the organic connection between the reader and author that early middlebrow critics felt was essential to the reading experience because of the intermediary party.<sup>45</sup> When thinking about a middlebrow mode of reading, mediation applies to the middlebrow reading of highbrow

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43. For more on readers who read in ways that might be considered “bad” by universities as well as these cultural arbiters, see Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Leah Price, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

44. Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 27.

45. Travis, “Print and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture,” 359.

texts: mediation is not so necessary when reading middlebrow literature because readers are already equipped to understand it. Middlebrow mediation asserts that anyone can approach the great works of literature, even without an upper class background or higher education, as long as they have a little help. Here, I draw upon the work of John Guillory, who argues that “the great works of the Western tradition are not now, nor have they ever been, integrated into the American cultural experience outside the university, except by means of middlebrow cultural forms.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he defines middlebrow culture as “the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural.”<sup>47</sup> In the middlebrow mode, literary texts are encountered through an intentional framework of mediation to enable purposeful reading and increase access. Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* offers an excellent example of this middlebrow mediation because in it she depicts extensive conversations among Book-of-the-Month club judges trying to determine which books will best suit their readers.<sup>48</sup> The middlebrow cultural arbiter must carefully consider readers’ purposes for reading in order to connect readers with books that will best match those purposes.

We might think of cultural arbiters as one type of what Deborah Brandt calls “sponsors of literacy.”<sup>49</sup> They provide guidance to readers regarding what to read and

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46. John Guillory, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture,” *Transition*, no. 67 (1995): 84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935258>.

47. Guillory, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture,” 87.

48. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 271.

49. Deborah Brandt, “Sponsors of Literacy,” *College Composition and Communication* 49, no. 2 (1998): 165–85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/358929>. Brandt’s description refers to sponsors of literacy in the literal and narrow sense of learning how to read, but her term has been taken up elsewhere to discuss figures such as Oprah “sponsoring” literacy in the broader sense of engaging in reading as a part of daily life.

how to go about reading it because they are more knowledgeable, but they also have something to gain from their mediation, whether that be profits from selling their product or the satisfaction of becoming a household name. These middlebrow cultural arbiters operate outside of traditional highbrow institutions, though they may be adjacent to them. In the first part of the early twentieth century, for example, cultural arbiters often had ties to universities or publishing houses, but cultural arbiters emerged from other backgrounds in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as the gap between producers and consumers narrowed.

The resounding refrain in middlebrow scholarship is that the middlebrow must be taken seriously. Considering the rich field that has developed since the 1990s,<sup>50</sup> that goal seems to have been achieved. An expanded understanding of the literary middlebrow as a mode of reading characterized by being purposeful, in that readers expect to gain something from their reading, and mediated, in that it is guided by a cultural arbiter, can contribute to a representation of the middlebrow in all of its complexities.

### **Recommended Reading and the Book List Book**

Book lists, lists of recommended reading developed for and sold to readers outside of a formal educational setting, are excellent artifacts to trace how the middlebrow mode of

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50. The following represents central scholarship devoted to the middlebrow: Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*; Guillory, "The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture"; Radway, *A Feeling for Books*; Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*; Travis, "Print and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture"; Botshon and Goldsmith, *Middlebrow Moderns*; David Carter, "The Mystery of the Missing Middlebrow or the C(or)urse of Good Taste," in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New World*, ed. Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 173-201; Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow"; Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*; Harker, *America the Middlebrow*; Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009); Hutner, *What America Read*; Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*; Humble, "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back"; Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, "Introduction: The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism," *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 1-17; Brown and Grover, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*; Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*; and Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*.

reading shifted over the course of time because they make both mediation and purpose for reading explicit. Although today recommended reading lists of all kinds can be found on websites and in periodicals, these lists have been published as standalone books since the late nineteenth century. Such “book list books” typically contain two parts: an introduction establishing the ethos of the listmaker and the logic behind the book selection process; and the list itself, oftentimes including commentary on each recommended title. This commentary frames the middlebrow reading experience by helping readers determine whether to read a text, as well as how to go about interpreting it, benefiting from it, and talking about it. But in a larger sense, these book list books are a window into what their authors, and middlebrow culture as a whole, saw as the purpose of the middlebrow reading experience. In this dissertation, I examine the purposes for reading espoused in book list books available to readers of diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and socio-economic identities in the United States from the nineteenth century to the present, analyzing how book list books define and guide middlebrow reading.

Broadly speaking, book recommendation underscores how the middlebrow can be understood as a mode of reading, because a book recommendation for *Anna Karenina*—a text typically considered “highbrow”—may appear in *Real Simple*—an early twenty-first-century magazine typically considered “middlebrow” in that it presents an aspirational, though not “highbrow” approach to lifestyle, fashion, and entertainment to a primarily female readership. Russell Lynes also notes that highbrows can similarly cross “brow” boundaries:

There are also many highbrows who are not concerned in the least with the arts or with literature, and who do not fret themselves about the upstart state of middlebrow culture. These are the specialized highbrows who toil in the remote corners of science and history, of philology and mathematics....When not in their

laboratories or the library, they are often as not thoroughly middlebrow in their attitudes and tastes.<sup>51</sup>

A middlebrow mode of reading accounts for such shifts in “brow” in the different contexts of an individual’s life, and recommended reading practices illustrate these shifts.

Excellent scholarship has already explored many different forms of book recommendation and selection, including the Book-of-the-Month Club, the bestseller list, Oprah’s Book Club, and publishing series.<sup>52</sup> Book lists that are not part of the marketing and sales of titles, however, have received surprisingly little critical attention. Amy Blair’s 2012 *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States*, an account of how Hamilton Wright Mabie’s book recommendation column in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* invited readers to “misread” the best books for personal advancement, is the only book-length treatment of a book list of this kind.<sup>53</sup>

Even less scholarship exists regarding book list books, recommended reading lists published and sold as standalone books. Paul Tankard’s 2006 “Reading Lists” addresses

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51. Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (1954; New York: Dover Publications, 1980), 315.

52. Critical studies of book recommendation and marketing include, but are not limited to: Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947); Radway, *A Feeling for Books*; Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2001); Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Jay Satterfield, *The World’s Best Books: Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005); Kathleen Rooney, *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club that Changed America* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2005); Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*; Anouk Lang, *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow, and the Literary Canon*.

53. Blair, *Reading Up*.

E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, but it does so in a discussion of the linguistic function of lists rather than their impact on reading practices.<sup>54</sup> In her 2009 contribution to *A History of the Book in America* entitled "The Enduring Reader," Joan Shelley Rubin uses book list books such as the 1947 *Good Reading: A Guide to the World's Best Books* and the 1960 *The Lifetime Reading Plan* to illustrate tensions regarding the purpose and place of reading in the Postwar era.<sup>55</sup> In his 2012 "Literary Taste and List Culture in a Time of 'Endless Choice,'" David Wright characterizes book list books as responding to a period when readers face bewildering literary choices and will not necessarily encounter the "best" books organically.<sup>56</sup> My project expands upon this scholarship by explicating and comparing book list books available to readers in the United States since the nineteenth century, uncovering the ways in which middlebrow reading was advocated for and conceptualized by these listmakers through their introductions and the lists themselves. Book list books problematize a definition of the middlebrow as intrinsic to texts and readers because, although the vast majority of these book list books have an implied audience of middlebrow readers, the books they recommend are largely challenging texts that have stood the test of time. This incongruity necessitates a modification in the way we

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54. Paul Tankard, "Reading Lists," *Prose Studies* 28, no. 3 (December 2006): 337–60, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440350600975531>.

55. Joan Shelley Rubin, "The Enduring Reader," in *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 5, *The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, ed. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 412-31. I discuss the *Lifetime Reading Plan* in Chapter 2.

56. David Wright, "Literary Taste and List Culture in a Time of 'Endless Choice,'" in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 108-23.

conceive of the middlebrow, expanding from a middlebrow text or reader to also include a mediated and purposeful middlebrow mode of reading.

### **A History of “Literature”**

While some book list books certainly limit recommendations to specific niches, the most common type of book list book recommends “great literature.” This means that book list books have morphed alongside broader shifts in the way that literary culture defines and values literary texts. As we consider how book list books have represented and ranked the literary, it is also important to understand that the modern concept of literature itself is also only the latest iteration of an evolving definition rather than criteria that have been fixed throughout textual history. Prior to the late nineteenth century, “literature” was understood to mean something much broader than it does today. As Raymond Williams explains, the fourteenth century definition of “litterature” was much closer to the present concept of “literacy,” reflecting the ability to read and being a person who has read. In the eighteenth century, “literature” took on a more specialized social connotation that reflected some small amount of education. With the development of printing technologies emerged the additional definition of “literature” as not only a quality a person possessed, but also printed books—of all types, not simply imaginative literature—that conveyed that knowledge.<sup>57</sup> As David R. Shumway points out, “for a long time, having literature—meaning the ability to read and write—was equivalent to having knowledge because these abilities were not a given.”<sup>58</sup> As education and the

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57. Raymond L. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Marxist Introductions, ed. Steven Lukes (1977; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 46-48.

58. David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, *American Culture*, vol. 11 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 27.

ability to read became more commonplace, the definition of literature became more specialized.

The modern understanding of “literature” originates in the late nineteenth century. It resulted from the reading revolution in the eighteenth century, which allowed many more readers to read many more books than ever before, creating demand for distinctions between different types of books.<sup>59</sup> Williams accounts for three ways in which the definition of “literature” was shaped during this time: “first, a shift from ‘learning’ to ‘taste’ or ‘sensibility’ as a criterion defining literary quality; second, an increasing specialization of literature to ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ works; third, a development of the concept of ‘tradition’ within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of ‘a national literature.’”<sup>60</sup> As a result, “literature” went from being understood as “printed books” to the much more exclusive imaginative literature within a national literary tradition, which enabled the debates that continue to this day about what should be included and excluded in our understanding of “literature.”<sup>61</sup> Alongside “literature,” another definition emerged in the late nineteenth century when Matthew Arnold defined “culture” as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.”<sup>62</sup>

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59. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 28-29.

60. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 48.

61. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 51-52. Shumway also discusses the impact of this on American literature in *Creating American Civilization*.

62. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Samuel Lipman (1875; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 5. As Williams notes, before Arnold provided this definition of culture, there was



With these distinctions in place, the academic discipline of English literature also emerged in the nineteenth century, though, as Gauri Viswanathan notes, the history of the discipline is complex. It has multiple threads, each with a different origin, different contexts, and different rationales. At times, these threads were woven together, but they also had opportunities to evolve independently.<sup>63</sup> In India, where the study of English culture began in the 1820s, English literature was a colonial tool for cultural hegemony, ultimately intended to be “an instrument for ensuring industriousness, efficiency, trustworthiness, and compliance in native subjects.”<sup>64</sup> It wasn’t until the 1870s that the study of English literature arrived in British and American schools, shifting students’ academic reading from classical languages to texts written in their mother tongue.<sup>65</sup> These early English classes laid the foundation for the middlebrow belief that studying literature could be a means for self-improvement within the context of a particular society and, at the same time, implicated the literary middlebrow in the larger imperialist history of English studies.

By the early twentieth century, “literature” was understood as a specific type of imaginative writing that was worthy of study due to its perceived quality, and various

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no good word to describe the product of cultivating the intellect in the same way that “health” and “virtue” were used. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 110-111.

63. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, 25th anniv. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xii.

64. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, 2; 93.

65. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 10. For an overview of early English literature as a subject in British schools, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1957). For a history of *belles lettres* and English literature and composition at Yale University and Brown University, see Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

literary stakeholders fought to exercise their power in articulating which books were “good” and which were trash. Book list books are not only historical records of these battles, but also participants in them. As Umberto Eco argues, “the list is the mark of a highly advanced, cultivated society because a list allows us to question the essential definitions. The essential definition is primitive compared with the list.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, lists provide concrete examples that can expand upon and revise definitions. Every book listmaker makes decisions about which books to include on their list and which to leave out. In every inclusive or exclusive act, these listmakers craft their own definitions of “literature.”

### **Sir John Lubbock’s Hundred Best: Middlebrow Before “Middlebrow”**

Although readings have been recommended since written language took hold as a technology,<sup>67</sup> the book list book as we now know it can be traced to a single primogenitor in the nineteenth century: Sir John Lubbock’s 1886 list of one hundred best books. In some ways, this list is yet another manifestation of the Victorian impulse to classify and organize knowledge. More than that, though, Lubbock’s list features key elements of the middlebrow—namely, purposeful and mediated reading—long before the interwar period when the term “middlebrow” was coined and scholars typically recognize its inception.

Sir John Lubbock was a busy man. He was not only a banker and scientist, but also a Liberal Member of Parliament for over thirty years who fought for the rights of

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66. Umberto Eco, interview by Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris, “SPIEGEL Interview with Umberto Eco: ‘We Like Lists Because We Don’t Want to Die,’” *SPIEGEL Online*, November 11, 2009, accessed July 31, 2020, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html>.

67. Some scholars date the first book list to the Alexandria library, circa 300 B.C.E. Hugh Stephenson Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement” (PhD diss, University of Chicago, 1964), 11-12, accessed June 17, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

workers.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, he served as President of the Working Men's College in London, and it was there, on January 9, 1886, where he gave a lecture on books and reading in which he recommended "a hundred good books."<sup>69</sup> On January 11, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, an evening newspaper in London, reported on the lecture and printed the full list of recommended reading.<sup>70</sup> But the *Pall Mall*'s acting editor, E.T. Cook, took this journalistic project beyond mere reporting.<sup>71</sup> Taking Lubbock's comment that "if we had such lists drawn up by a few good guides, they would be most useful"<sup>72</sup> as a call to action, Cook sent the list to approximately one hundred "leading English men and women in all the different walks of life" for their commentary, additions, and deletions, which were then printed in the weeks that followed the original article as "The Best Hundred Books by the Best Hundred Judges."<sup>73</sup> Lubbock's original audience was those working-class men (there was a separate college for working-class women in London at that time) who attended his lecture in person. By publishing the list in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and

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68. W.B. Carnochan, "Where Did Great Books Come From Anyway?" *Stanford Humanities Review* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1998), accessed June 16, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/6-1/html/carnochan.html>; Clare Hutton, "'The Promise of Literature in the Coming Days': The Best Hundred Irish Books Controversy of 1886," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 2 (September 2011): 581, accessed June 28, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150311000155>; Martha Salmon Vogeler, "The Victorians and the Hundred Best," *The Texas Quarterly* (Spring 1968): 184.

69. Sir John Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," in *The World's Best Orations: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, ed. Edward Archibald Allen and William Schuyler (St. Louis, MO: F.P. Kaiser, 1901) 7:2822.

70. "Sir John Lubbock's Liberal Education," *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), January 11, 1886, accessed July 2, 2020, British Newspaper Archive.

71. Vogeler, "The Victorians and the Hundred Best," 185.

72. Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," 7:2822.

73. "The Best Hundred Books by the Best Hundred Judges" *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), January 19, 1886, accessed July 2, 2020, British Newspaper Archive.

soliciting feedback, Cook gave Lubbock a much broader audience than he had originally intended.

Notable replies to Cook's correspondence regarding Lubbock's list included the Prince of Wales, who suggested adding Dryden, and John Ruskin, who described his annotations as "putting my pen lightly through the needless--and blottesquely through the rubbish and poison."<sup>74</sup> Lady Dilke, the writer characterized in the article as "one of the most accomplished and learned women of the day," critiqued Lubbock's list, writing that "to be in a position to properly understand and appreciate the works on Sir John's list, I undertake to say that one must have spent at least thirty years in preparatory study, and have had the command of, say, something more than a thousand other volumes" before proposing her own additions.<sup>75</sup> This level of preparation would not have characterized Lubbock's original audience at the college nor that of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Matthew Arnold himself also responded, though his reply merely stated that "lists such as Sir John Lubbock's are interesting things to look at, but I feel no disposition to make one" before making excuses for his limited time to participate in the project.<sup>76</sup> Lubbock responded to the public comments on his list in an article on February 15 titled "The Choice of Books," but the interest didn't end there.<sup>77</sup> In 1887, Lubbock's *The Pleasures of Life* included a version of his speech and list as one chapter in an essay collection.<sup>78</sup> One

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74. "The Best Hundred Books by the Best Hundred Judges."

75. "The Best Hundred Books by the Best Hundred Judges."

76. Quoted in Vogeler, "The Victorians and the Hundred Best," 189.

77. Sir John Lubbock, "The Choice of Books," *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), February 15, 1886, accessed July 2, 2020, British Newspaper Archive.

78. Sir John Lubbock, *The Pleasures of Life*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1887), accessed July 3, 2020, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/\\_/gGkAAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/gGkAAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1).

decade after the booklist frenzy began, in 1896, his *The Choice of Books* took a narrower focus and contained only the speech and list alongside one other speech on reading.<sup>79</sup>

The success of Lubbock's project came, at least in part, from new and overwhelming literary marketplace conditions in the late nineteenth century. At the beginning of Lubbock's speech, he remarks that "people are overwhelmed by the crowd of books offered to them.... Our ancestors had a difficulty in procuring them. Our difficulty now is what to select."<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the shifts in publishing, authorship, and the rapid expansion of the literary marketplace in the nineteenth century are well documented.<sup>81</sup> With so many more people able to access and read so many more books, Lubbock identifies a concern for potentially choosing the wrong book. His list helps readers outside of the academy, beginning with his audience at the Working Men's College and later expanding to a much wider audience with male and female readers of all classes, to navigate the now much larger sea of books available to them and choose those that will not "waste time over trash."<sup>82</sup> Here, in the late nineteenth century, is the middlebrow impulse to use even one's leisure time productively.

The purpose for reading espoused in Lubbock's speech and writings, to use reading time well when so many books are available, responds to these new literary marketplace

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79. Sir John Lubbock, *The Choice of Books* (1896; repr., Lake Oswego, OR: Blackwell's Book Services, 1999).

80. Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," 7:2820.

81. See William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America: 1790-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959); William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1968); Sarah Wadsworth, *In the Company of Books: Literature and Its "Classes" in Nineteenth-Century America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006); and William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

82. Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," 7:2820.

conditions, but also to the changing nature of work and professionalization. In considering his audience, Lubbock says,

I am sometimes disposed to think that the readers of the next generation will be, not our lawyers and doctors, shopkeepers and manufacturers, but the laborers and mechanics. Does not this seem natural? The former work mainly with their heads; when their daily duties are over, the brain is often exhausted, and of their leisure time much must be devoted to air and exercise. The laborer and mechanic, on the contrary, besides working often for much shorter hours, have in their work-time taken sufficient bodily exercise, and could therefore give any leisure they might have to reading and study.<sup>83</sup>

Whereas the white-collar professions would typically be thought of as more learned, and whereas later book lists often address an audience of college- or at least high school-educated professionals, Lubbock explicitly calls out the working class as the future reading majority due to the physicality of their jobs and their expanding leisure time and creates his list with these readers in mind. At this point, there is not yet the possibility of working-class readers using the recommended books to move themselves into the middle and upper classes. Instead of functioning as cultural capital, reading Lubbock's recommended books is a means of improving the quality of the working classes, making their lives better while keeping them out of trouble, without threatening the position of the well-bred ruling classes. However, recommending books for working class readers does not mean that Lubbock dumbs down his selections. Quite to the contrary: Lubbock says instead, "Many, I believe, are deterred from attempting what are called stiff books for fear they should not understand them; but there are few who need complain of the narrowness of their minds, if only they would do their best with them."<sup>84</sup> He includes not only fiction, but also theology, ancient philosophy, epic poetry, and Greek drama. Like

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83. Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," 7:2821.

84. Lubbock, "The Hundred Best Books," 7:2820.

Arnold before him and many listmakers after him, Lubbock believes that all readers should spend their time on the best, and his list is intended to help readers separate the wheat from the chaff.

Although the *Pall Mall Gazette* titles its series “The Best Hundred Books,” Lubbock’s mediation comes across as much more humble. Lubbock doesn’t promise the *best* hundred books but rather “a hundred *good* books.”<sup>85</sup> He further distances himself from the judgement involved in his recommendations by hedging, “I suggest these works rather as those which, as far as I have seen, have been most frequently recommended than as suggestions of my own, though I have slipped in a few of my own special favorites.”<sup>86</sup> Future listmakers will make similar rhetorical moves, strengthening their own recommendations with outside support. But this list has Lubbock’s name on it, so it is Lubbock who is addressed in the pages of the newspapers. When he responds to the “hundred best judges,” he does so graciously yet stands his ground. He observes,

Nine of your correspondents have favoured us with lists of some length. These lists contain some 300 works not mentioned by me (without, however, any corresponding omissions), and yet there is not one single book which occurs in every list, or even in half of them, and only about half a dozen which appear in more than one of the nine.

If your correspondents, or even a majority of them, had concurred in any recommendation, I would have availed myself of it; but as they differ so greatly I will allow my list to remain as I first proposed it.<sup>87</sup>

Here, Lubbock comes across as a listmaker who would cede to greater literary minds but, upon rational assessment of their feedback, chooses not to. This response, combined with

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85. Lubbock, “The Hundred Best Books,” 7:2822.

86. Lubbock, “The Hundred Best Books,” 7:2822.

87. Lubbock, “The Choice of Books.” Lady Dilke and John Ruskin did propose some omissions, but Lubbock seems to have overlooked or disregarded them.

the straightforward and undecorated nature of the original list, makes Lubbock's recommendations appear more objective and therefore perhaps more appealing to the nineteenth-century reader. In short, Lubbock's mediation characterizes him as a trustworthy proto-middlebrow authority.

Lubbock's list had a significant and lasting impact on readers and middlebrow reading. In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Rose recounts the story of a London policeman who "read diligently through" Lubbock's list. Rose defends the list as "enormously popular" among working class readers who were "eager to make up for an education that had been denied" and "not ashamed to ask for a roadmap."<sup>88</sup> The issue of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in which the original list appeared sold forty thousand copies or more,<sup>89</sup> and the list was reprinted in several forms, so countless other readers would also have turned to Lubbock for a roadmap. Although Lubbock's was not the first recommended reading list, it was so impactful, initiating an international interest in book listmaking, that scholars and book listmakers alike credit it as the first book list as we know it today, helping readers to curate their reading in an age of limitless choice.<sup>90</sup> For example, in his 1931 *One Thousand Best Books: The Household Guide to a Lifetime's Reading and Clue to the Literary Labyrinth Compiled from Many Authoritative Lists*, University of Pennsylvania librarian and book listmaker several times over Asa Don Dickinson reflects upon the many lists that have been published since Lubbock's and

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88. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 128-29. Unfortunately, Rose only includes this one response to Lubbock's list, so we do not have extant examples of the female reader's experience with it.

89. Tim Lacy, "Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea, 1869-1921," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 4 (2008): 408.

90. Donald L. Foster, "100 Best Books," *RQ* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1968): 22 accessed June 28, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25823164>.



justifies his own addition because each list is subjective.<sup>91</sup> This, of course, is what makes book lists both interesting and problematic. As W. B. Carnochan argues in a discussion of Lubbock's list,

To list any hundred "best," even when soliciting alternatives and later trying to undo the deed, is to reify "the hundred best." It is to delude oneself, no matter how agreeably, with the fancy that the concept of "the hundred best" actually means something exact, that we can tell what "best"—independent of the question "best for what?"—could possibly mean. It is to introduce the threat and promise of a doctrinaire scale of value.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout this dissertation, I will address this question—"best for what?"—examining the ways in which the implicit responses of listmakers following Lubbock change over time in the form of their mediation and idealized purposes for reading. Book list books reveal how the category of the middlebrow changes alongside shifts in American education, deference to authority, and the ways in which average readers select their books.

### **Overview of Chapters**

The chapters of this dissertation are organized chronologically, extending from Lubbock's original list to the present day, with each chapter focusing on one or two central book list books. Examining book list books in this way allows us to trace the evolution of a middlebrow mode of reading over the course of more than a century, from its initial heyday during the interwar period through late twentieth-century challenges to the concept of the literary canon and finally to a "new" middlebrow in the early twenty-first century. The mediation of and purposes for middlebrow reading have been shaped

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91. Asa Don Dickinson, *One Thousand Best Books: The Household Guide to a Lifetime's Reading and Clue to the Literary Labyrinth Compiled from Many Authoritative Lists* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1931), ix.

92. Carnochan, "Where Did Great Books Come From Anyway?"

by the historical concerns of each generation, particularly the feminist and civil rights movements, but the nature of the middlebrow mode of reading—that it is purposeful and mediated—has endured.

In Chapter 1, “‘A light book about heavy reading’: Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book* and the Great Books Idea,” I examine the ways in which the middlebrow mode of reading functioned as an extension of the “great books” movement in higher education in the first half of the twentieth century. This movement marked a shift in American higher education from curricula focused on the rote study of classical languages to direct engagement with the “great books” written in and translated into English. Perhaps the most famous book list book from this period, and the central text in this chapter, is the 1940 *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* by Mortimer J. Adler, who brought the great books curriculum to the University of Chicago. In his preface, Adler describes text as “a light book about heavy reading,”<sup>93</sup> further illustrating the divide between the supposed “brow” of the intended readers and that of the literary texts they should read. Adler’s mediation, which is indirect and focuses on carefully prescribed reading instruction, enables readers to gain the cultural capital of a liberal education outside of the college environment.

During the second half of the twentieth century, an increased interest in multiculturalism and feminism brought the literary canon under fire. In Chapter 2, “Clifton Fadiman’s *Lifetime Reading Plan* and the Changing Canon,” I find that the middlebrow mode of reading reflects and participates in debates about the literary canon from both sides, with some book list books staunchly reinforcing the traditional Western

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93. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), vii.

canon and others expanding their lists to increase representation of women and people of color. After outlining both conservative and progressive perspectives on the literary canon and how these perspectives were promoted both on and off college campuses, I consider the nature of the literary canon itself, which paradoxically is always changing even as it relies upon a narrative of endurance. I examine Clifton Fadiman's *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, a text that defended the traditional Western canon in its original 1960 edition but was then revised and expanded to reflect the changing canon with the aid of coauthor John S. Major in its 1997 edition, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan: The Classic Guide to World Literature, Revised and Expanded*. The new edition includes great works from the Eastern canon, world literatures, and more works written by women and people of color. These two editions of the same book list book provide a unique opportunity to trace the opening of the canon as it relates to middlebrow reading practices.

In the early twenty-first century, the middlebrow mode of reading responds to the increasing sense that the world is broken in terms of politics, gaps in socioeconomic status, and treatment based on race, gender, ability, and sexuality. In Chapter 3, "The Healing Power of Twenty-First-Century Middlebrow Reading," I analyze different types of healing through middlebrow reading as demonstrated by book list books. Some book list books explicitly address healing through the use of bibliotherapy, such as Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin's 2013 *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You*, in which book recommendations are organized by readers' "ailments," from the emotional to the physical. Other book list books, like Kevin Smokler's 2013 *Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven't Touched Since High School*, seek to rehabilitate readers' relationships with

classic literature following damaging experiences with the educational system and high-stakes assessment. These two book list books demonstrate the ways in which the middlebrow mode of reading shifts to draw upon new types of cultural authority and use reading for healing purposes in the early twenty-first century.

## Chapter 1

### “A light book about heavy reading”: Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book* and the Great Books Idea

There is no end to the making of books. Nor does there seem to be any end to the making of book lists. The one is the cause of the other. There have always been more books than anyone could read....at best, you will be able to read only a few books of all that have been written, and the few you do read should include the best. You can rejoice in the fact that there are not too many great books to read.

—Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book*

In the 1930s and 40s, America was steeped in products considered “middlebrow” in that they sought to bring high culture to the general public. Never before was the country so hungry for what Matthew Arnold famously called “the best which has been thought and said in the world,”<sup>1</sup> and never before were so many people ready and willing to capitalize on that hunger through products and programming.<sup>2</sup> A driving force behind increasing accessibility to cultural works was the rising popularity of the great books idea, an education trend based on students reading foundational texts in the Western tradition to improve themselves and society. Squarely at the center of the great books idea was Mortimer Jerome Adler, who brought the great books to both elite University of Chicago students and adult extension learners around the country.<sup>3</sup>

As Adler writes in the passage that serves as this chapter’s epigraph, there was no shortage of published book list books in the first half of the twentieth century. These

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1. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1994), 5.

2. Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xi.

3. James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002), chap. 3.

included, among others, Jesse Lee Bennett's *On "Culture" and "A Liberal Education": With Lists of Books Which Can Aid in Acquiring Them*, Charles Lee's *How to Enjoy Reading*, John D. Snider's *I Love Books: A Guide Through Bookland*, and Francis Beauchesne Thornton's *How to Improve Your Personality by Reading*.<sup>4</sup> The bestseller of this period by far was Adler's own book list book, the 1940 *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*. *How to Read a Book* demonstrates how the middlebrow mode of reading during this time functioned as an extension of the great books movement in higher education. The extensive reading instruction Adler provides in *How to Read a Book* enables readers to engage with the great books through a highly mediated middlebrow mode of reading in order to gain the cultural capital and social mobility of a liberal education outside of the campus environment.

### **Mortimer Adler and the Great Books Idea**

Although the exact origin of the term "great books" that Adler uses throughout *How to Read a Book* is a matter of some debate, scholars date its inception in England and United States to the late nineteenth century as a product of Victorian culture.<sup>5</sup> The term then gained traction and entered into popular usage sometime in the first quarter of the

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4. Jesse Lee Bennett, *On "Culture" and "A Liberal Education": With Lists of Books Which Can Aid in Acquiring Them* (New York: The Arnold Company, 1922); Charles Lee, *How to Enjoy Reading* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Co., 1939); John D. Snider, *I Love Books: A Guide Through Bookland* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946); Francis Beauchesne Thornton, *How to Improve Your Personality by Reading* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Co., 1949).

5. W.B. Carnochan, "Where Did Great Books Come From Anyway?" *Stanford Humanities Review* 6, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1998), accessed June 17, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/6-1/html/carnochan.html>; Hugh Stephenson Moorhead, "The Great Books Movement" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1964), 16-17, accessed June 17, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. Hugh Moorhead notes that the word "great" is used in reference to books in both Charles F. Richardson's 1881 *The Choice of Books* and Frederic Harrison's 1888 *Choice of Books*. The term is used in titles for the first time in 1898 with Frederick William Farrar's "Great Books" column and subsequent book for *The Sunday Magazine* and Newell Dwight Hillis' *Great Books as Life-Teachers*.

twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In his exhaustive history of the great books movement, Hugh Moorhead provides a composite definition of a great book as “one which is universal and always contemporary in subject matter, dealing with human existence in relation to its perennial and unsolved (if not unsolvable) questions, a work of artistic merit, inexhaustible in its readability and interpretation, written in the final analysis for “everyman” rather than for the pedant or scholar.”<sup>7</sup> Tim Lacy further teases out the distinction between “great books” and the “canon,” noting that the canon exclusively relates to imaginative literature, whereas the great books include other subject matter such as works of philosophy and historical significance.<sup>8</sup> Even though the great books as they were envisioned in the early twentieth century were written almost exclusively by white men, the great books idea sought to democratize access to high culture, making it available to those from all socio-economic backgrounds including the many new immigrant populations in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The purpose for this democratization varied, including to read and discuss the great books for their own sake, to better understand (and perhaps improve) the present moment, to improve the reader’s mind and life, and to improve social connections and mobility.<sup>10</sup> Like the broader middlebrow, the great books

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6. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 16-17; Mortimer Jerome Adler, *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Collier Books, 1992), 55. Key players in the great books movement were, unsurprisingly, early adopters of the term. George Woodberry uses it in the introduction to his 1902 *One Hundred Books*. John Erskine used the term as early as 1908, perhaps passing it down to Adler, who recalls that he may have used the term as shorthand in his discussion with Robert Hutchins in the late 1920s.

7. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 11.

8. Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

9. Catherine Chaddock Reynolds, “A Canon of Democratic Intent: Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement,” *History of Higher Education Annual* 22 (2002): 7.

10. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 657.

idea at this time was more outwardly and socially oriented than purposes for reading would become as the twentieth century progressed. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the great books idea would expand to courses offered on elite college campuses such as Columbia University, adult reading groups, and products targeting readers from all sorts of backgrounds across the United States.

Although he came from humble roots, Mortimer Jerome Adler's biography is intimately entangled with the development of the great books idea in the United States, and he seems to have been destined to write a book list book himself. Adler was born in New York City in 1902 to Jewish parents who had immigrated from Germany. *How to Read a Book* was far from Adler's first reading list: his collected papers at the University of Chicago contain a notebook of his reading notes for the "great books" of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This notebook was completed during a summer in high school under the instruction of his mother, who was a schoolteacher, when Adler had "written a chapter-by-chapter report on a history of English literature that she had taken out of the local library for [him] to read."<sup>12</sup> Despite, or perhaps because, of this early interest in reading, Adler dropped out of high school to work at the *New York Sun*, intending to become a journalist.<sup>13</sup> After two years at the *Sun*, however, he discovered the work of Plato and decided to study philosophy at Columbia, where he enrolled just before they, and other elite institutions, were beginning to restrict the number of Jewish students they

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11. Mortimer Jerome Adler, notebook, box 37, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

12. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 37. Adler's autobiography erroneously dates this notebook to his elementary school years, but the reading level of the texts, handwriting, and note on the inside cover of the notebook in the University of Chicago archives indicate that it was actually completed during his high school years.

13. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 3.



admitted.<sup>14</sup> As an undergraduate, Adler considered himself to be a dedicated student and independent thinker, often questioning his instructors' perspectives and hounding them outside of class. Despite earning more than enough credits to graduate, Adler failed to complete his bachelor's degree because he did not pass the swimming test or complete the college's physical education requirement.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Adler was able to continue on with a PhD in psychology at Columbia and later published on the philosophy of law.<sup>16</sup>

During his junior and senior year at Columbia, Adler had what he would later consider to be the most transformational educational experience of his career, which would inspire him to mediate the great books for a widespread middlebrow audience: taking General Honors with John Erskine, a professor in the English department. Adler happened to join the first offering of General Honors, a two-year course that began in the fall of 1920. The *Columbia College Announcement* for General Honors described the class as "reading of Masterpieces of literature in poetry, history, philosophy and science, with conferences and reports."<sup>17</sup> General Honors students read these "Masterpieces" at the rate of one book per week for approximately sixty weeks over the two academic years of the course, beginning with Homer and working their way to Freud.<sup>18</sup> The class gathered on Wednesday evenings in Hamilton Hall to discuss their readings with each

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14. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 6; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Open Road Media, 2017), 389, ProQuest Ebook Central; Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29-31.

15. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 21.

16. Lacy, *Dream of a Democratic Culture*, 3-4.

17. Quoted in Moorhead, "Great Books Movement," 88.

18. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 30-31.

other, Erskine, and co-leader Raymond Weaver.<sup>19</sup> Later in life, as he looked back on the course while writing his first autobiography, Adler praised General Honors as “a college in itself—the whole of a liberal education or certainly the core of it.”<sup>20</sup> Adler left his undergraduate years at Columbia considering himself a “Great Bookie,”<sup>21</sup> not yet knowing that his would become one of the names most closely associated with the great books idea because of his desire to bring the liberal education of the great books to others through both higher education and middlebrow auto-didacticism.

Although it would become a great success, bringing General Honors to Columbia had taken many years and a great deal of effort on the part of John Erskine. The course itself was inspired by an earlier teacher, George Edward Woodberry, who was known for being a proud generalist, encouraging students to consider their reading in relation to their own experience and see that individual experience in light of a larger human experience.<sup>22</sup> Erskine attempted to bring this philosophy of reading to a larger student base at Columbia, but his proposal efforts were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. Erskine himself served in the war, overseeing educational efforts for Army servicemen in France.<sup>23</sup> Upon his return, Erskine renewed his efforts to offer a Columbia course grounded in the great books. As part of his proposal, Erskine developed a reading list,

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19. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 88.

20. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 30-31.

21. Quoted in Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 103-4.

22. Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 155.

23. Legend has it that Erskine conducted an experimental great books program while in Beaune and was fortified by his experience there to develop his General Honors course at Columbia. However, Moorhead’s extensive research indicates that this story is likely little more than great books lore. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 51-71.

using Sir John Lubbock's list as a starting point, of approximately 75 great books for students to read over the course of two years. The list, which Erskine would have prepared with primarily white and Jewish male students in mind given the demographics at Columbia at the time, was comprised entirely of men writing in the Western tradition and featured only four American writers.<sup>24</sup> The Columbia faculty was highly critical of Erskine's proposal, arguing that undergraduates were incapable of reading the great books and expressing concern regarding Erskine's generalist approach.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the proposal was approved, and the original version of the General Honors course ran from 1920-1929, enrolling a number of students who would later rise to fame in their respective fields.<sup>26</sup> The course has evolved since its first offering in 1920 but is still offered today in the form of Literature Humanities, a course in Columbia's core curriculum.<sup>27</sup>

Once Adler entered the graduate program at Columbia in 1923, he began teaching the General Honors course which he had found so influential as an undergraduate. His first teaching assignment was alongside Mark Van Doren, who had been with General Honors

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24. Amy Apfel Kass, "Radical Conservatives for Liberal Education" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1973), 19-22, accessed June 17, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses; Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 165-66.

25. Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 167; Kass, 20.

26. "Among them (aside from Adler) were Morris G. Cohen, one of the initial twenty-four to take the course; Henry Morton Robinson and Henry Simon (with Adler in the 1921 class); Clifton Fadiman, Lionel Trilling, and Whittaker Chambers (1923); Jacques Barzun (1925). Notable names in other fields of endeavor were Eliot Bell (president of McGraw-Hill), Leon Keyserling (economist and adviser to President Truman), Joseph Mankiewicz (Hollywood producer and director), and Frank Bowles (head of the College Entrance Examination Board)." Moorhead, "Great Books Movement," 93-94.

27. Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 19; "Literature Humanities," Columbia College, copyright 2013, accessed June 30, 2018, <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/lithum>.

since its inception and previously taught the course with Erskine himself.<sup>28</sup> Having already read the books on the General Honors syllabus, Adler recalls thinking that he could quickly reread them to brush up on their content before leading the weekly discussions. He soon found himself overwhelmed by the realization that he had not truly read the books in the first place and felt as though he were reading them for the first time. In his autobiography, Adler writes that he found “that one reading of the great books had scarcely scratched the surface. On the second reading, which I did in order to teach them, I discovered how little I understood them and how much more I had to learn from them.”<sup>29</sup> This discovery would shape the way he later recommended middlebrow readers read in *How to Read a Book*, in which he prescribes three readings with different aims to fully understand a great book. Adler tried to compensate for his ineffective reading by over-preparing for class and then lecturing his students rather than leading them in discussion, but a young Clifton Fadiman, a student in the class who was also Jewish and would later become book editor at the *New Yorker*, editor in chief at Simon & Schuster, and a close friend of Adler’s, regularly pointed out what he saw as Adler’s shortcomings. Fed up with these classroom interactions, Adler finally admitted his defeat, whereupon Fadiman offered to help him teach the seminar.<sup>30</sup> Adler acquiesced and continued teaching, developing, and promoting General Honors for many years, having mastered both the reading strategies and discussion facilitation with which he had initially struggled.

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28. Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 105.

29. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 34-35.

30. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 65.

In 1926, Adler brought General Honors to the public, initiating great books seminars offered to New Yorkers through The People's Institute, which Charles Sprague Smith had founded in 1897 to combat the challenges of modern urban life.<sup>31</sup> The People's Institute functioned as a community education center targeting adult immigrants and members of the working class for lectures, classes, and other events emphasizing cultural and social education.<sup>32</sup> The People's Institute was available to anyone who wanted to learn with no entrance requirements or learning assessments, and the majority of lecture attendees were born outside the United States in Europe, Asia, or Africa.<sup>33</sup> Smith had previously held a professorship at Columbia University but left the position because he was uncomfortable with the disconnect between the protections of the university and the social and living conditions elsewhere in the city.<sup>34</sup> The extension of Columbia's General Honors to The People's Institute context, though it took place after Smith's death, provided the connection between the university and the city that he had called for.

This early incarnation of an adult great books program was experimental, the result of a \$10,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation to study the efficacy of small group discussions as an alternative to lectures in adult education.<sup>35</sup> Because demand for these

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31. The New York Public Library, *People's Institute Records, 1883-1933* (2003), iv, accessed June 8, 2019, <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/2380#overview>; Robert Bruce Fisher, "The People's Institute of New York City, 1897-1934: Culture, Progressive Democracy, and the People" (PhD diss., New York University, 1974), 3-4, accessed June 8, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

32. New York Public Library, *People's Institute Records*, iv-v; Fisher, "The People's Institute," 3-4, 22-23.

33. Kass, "Radical Conservatives for Liberal Education," 2-3.

34. Fisher, "The People's Institute," 10.

35. Philip N. Youtz, *Experimental Classes for Adult Education: A Report of the Extension Activities of the People's Institute of New York* (New York: Bulletin of the American Association for Adult Education, n.d), 5, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015063872678>.

classes was so great, The People's Institute was able to accept 134 male and female participants from a wide variety of backgrounds. Each of the small discussion groups had some sort of background commonality in terms of participants' age, educational level, social class, race, or ethnicity, allowing for a study of the discussion format on different populations.<sup>36</sup> Junior faculty members from Columbia University, including Adler himself, led the discussion groups, which required participants to read between two and eight hours per week and contribute to discussions.<sup>37</sup> Although the discussion format proved challenging when participants didn't complete the readings, group leaders generally considered the project to be worthwhile and were pleased with the quality of the discussions.<sup>38</sup> Participant retention indicates that the adult learners also found the classes valuable—the attrition rate for The People's Institute classes, with working-class and immigrant participants, was lower than the average college rates at the time.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Columbia students and People's Institute participants was their attitudes: in *Experimental Classes for Adult Education: A Report of the Extension Activities of the People's Institute of New York*, Philip N. Youtz, Secretary of The People's Institute, writes that, “in contrast to the meek undergraduate desire to learn, among these adult students was a desire to *think*.”<sup>40</sup> The People's Institute experiment suggests that reading the great books with the mediation of a facilitator, in this case discussion led by university faculty, provides an opportunity for adults to engage

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36. Youtz, *Experimental Classes for Adult Education*, 5-6; Moorhead, “Great Books Movement,” 122.

37. Youtz, *Experimental Classes for Adult Education*, 6; Fisher, “The People's Institute,” 406-7.

38. Fisher, “The People's Institute,” 411-12.

39. Youtz, *Experimental Classes for Adult Education*, 7-8.

40. Youtz, *Experimental Classes for Adult Education*, 6. Italics mine.

in this critical thinking even when they lack formal education backgrounds. Furthermore, teaching in this forum solidified for Adler that the great books can and should be accessible to everyone, regardless of gender, race, or class,<sup>41</sup> a belief that would guide the rest of his career as an educator and public intellectual.

By 1929, Adler had become a public figure in education because of his work in New York, and a young Robert Maynard Hutchins was named president of the University of Chicago. Hutchins admitted to Adler that he didn't know much about education despite now leading a major university, so Adler shared his General Honors experience with Hutchins and advised him to read the great books as well. Hutchins surprised him by not only taking up the challenge, but also asking Adler to teach General Honors alongside him at the University of Chicago.<sup>42</sup> The course was offered to twenty students invited from the freshman class beginning in fall of 1930 and took two years to complete.<sup>43</sup> Just as in Erskine's class at Columbia, students read a book each week and met for two hours to discuss it, this time with Adler and Hutchins. At Adler's demand, the course met in a classroom dedicated exclusively to General Honors, for which students had keys allowing them to access it for private study. The room, originally located on the ground floor of the Classics Building, featured bookshelves filled with all of the great books on the General Honors syllabus and an oval table which allowed students to see each other during discussion and would later become a distinguishing feature of the great books program.<sup>44</sup>

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41. Lacy, *Dream of a Democratic Culture*, 23.

42. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 128-31.

43. Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture*, 89-90. The demographic details of this initial General Honors course at the University of Chicago are unfortunately unavailable.

44. Moorhead, "Great Books Movement," 252-53.

The course received press and attracted visitors from both on and off campus, most notably including Gertrude Stein.<sup>45</sup> From this early seminar, the course was adapted for the Law School, the University High School, and several other divisions of the university.<sup>46</sup> It lives on at the University of Chicago today as the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults.<sup>47</sup> The great books idea also spread to other college campuses and formed the foundation of St. John's College, which in 1937 adopted an undergraduate curriculum focused exclusively on reading the great books.<sup>48</sup>

After gaining prominence as a leader in higher education, Adler returned to the adult education project that he had begun at the People's Institute in New York, this time leading discussions throughout Chicago. The endeavor gained popularity because of a group affectionately called the "Fat Man's Class," a reference to the affluence of its members. Hutchins and Adler led this group of influential executives and their wives in reading and discussing the great books beginning in 1943. The group enthusiastically worked through the list of great books over the course of ten years, meeting every other week, before rereading and expanding the original list.<sup>49</sup> The middlebrow is frequently conflated with the middle class, but the enthusiasm with which these affluent men and

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45. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 139-40.

46. Moorhead, "Great Books Movement," 258.

47. "Basic Program of Liberal Education Core Curriculum Courses," University of Chicago, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/academic-programs/liberal-arts/basic-program/core-curriculum>.

48. Allen, *Romance of Commerce and Culture*, 92-93. Allen uses the term *Chicago Bildungsideal* to describe what he sees as a humanist "vision of salvation" intended to combat the problems of the modern world by studying the classics.

49. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 229-30; Allen, *Romance of Commerce and Culture*, 107. I do not have demographic details on these participants beyond their wealth, influence, and the fact that both men and women were included.



women, who had already achieved material wealth and success, approached the great books indicates that this conflation is short-sighted. Even the wealthy felt the pull of the great books to better themselves but chose to do so through the mediated structure of a class rather than on their own and used their book discussions to engage with others of their stature, suggesting that the cultural capital benefits of the great books were not limited to class mobility but rather could still be achieved when readers were already at the top. The publicity surrounding the Fat Man's Class led to increased interest in great books reading groups, and the Great Books Foundation was established on July 1, 1947 to keep up with average Americans' desire to become "great bookies" through the formation of reading groups around the country.<sup>50</sup> The success of great books reading groups comprised of such diverse readers, from working-class and immigrant readers at the People's Institute to students on college campuses to the affluent readers of the Fat Man's Class were further proof to Adler that anyone could read the great books with proper mediation and, furthermore, that anyone could use them for self-improvement, cultural capital, social mobility, and gaining a liberal education.

Adler capitalized on this mid-century great books frenzy with his 1952 publication of *Great Books of the Western World*, a 32,000 page, fifty-four volume collection of humanity's greatest ideas published by Encyclopædia Britannica. *Great Books of the Western World* sought to package classic texts, organizing them by topic to make it convenient for readers to trace a concept throughout history. The project went over budget, over schedule, and was practically unreadable due to its small print but ultimately

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50. Moorhead, "Great Books Movement," 328; Lacy, *Dream of a Democratic Culture*, 21; Allen, *Romance of Commerce and Culture*, 112.

sold 1 million sets.<sup>51</sup> *Great Books of the Western World* exemplifies the ways in which a middlebrow mode of reading can intertwine with capitalism through neatly packaged and heavily marketed tools for self-education. Having come a long way from a modest proposal by John Erskine, the great books idea had now extended beyond the ivory tower and into the living rooms and community centers of everyday Americans.

### **The Making of *How to Read a Book***

Well before the *Great Books of the Western World* project, Adler developed a much more readable and successful way to bring the great books idea to a mass audience. *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* provided a way for middlebrow readers to engage with the great books idea on their own, using Adler's highly prescriptive steps to read the classics in order to gain a liberal education. In addition to his work in higher education, Adler had offered public lectures on reading and found that adult learners were hungry for more guidance. After these lectures, Adler frequently received letters from men and women who had attended requesting his recommended reading list, to which he would send the list from St. John's College or a list published by the American Library Association.<sup>52</sup> The problem, however, was not only what to read but how to go about reading it, and it was Adler's concern for literacy in the United States that led him to write *How to Read a Book*. In his March 1939 letter pitching the project to Clifton Fadiman, who was then working for Simon & Schuster, Adler wrote,

I almost feel that we ought to start a crusade. The situation is certainly serious enough to start one. And it's damn serious politically and socially as well, for when

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51. Beam, *Great Idea at the Time*, 3-4; Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 193. The cost of this set would have been prohibitive for most in the working class, so this project did not have as broad of a reach as some of Adlers' others.

52. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, March 3, 1939, box 58, "Kip-HTRAB Ch 8" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

people can't read, they can be drugged by propaganda, they can be seduced by headlines and advertising; they are meat for dictators. You can't sustain democracy with a large illiterate population, with a large number of people whose literacy is at the level of the funny page; for such inability to read signifies no critical faculties whatsoever in the reception of communication. God help us if something isn't done about this.<sup>53</sup>

This letter expresses a genuine interest in improving literacy for the future of an American democracy that was threatened by the upcoming world war, and this motivation comes through in the finished book, particularly in the chapter titled "Free Minds and Free Men." But this patriotic concern was not Adler's only reason for writing *How to Read a Book*. Adler's interest was financial as well: the University of Chicago budget had not allowed for the raise that Adler had anticipated, and with his former roommate gone and another child on the way, Adler needed a \$1,000 book advance to stay afloat over the summer.<sup>54</sup> The idea for *How to Read a Book* emerged from a desire to serve the public, but the final push to actually write the book amongst an otherwise busy schedule was done for much more practical reasons, thus making *How to Read a Book* a quintessentially middlebrow blend of cultural uplift and financial gain.

Once Adler had an agreement and advance from Simon & Schuster, he got to work drafting *How to Read a Book* as quickly as possible, writing a chapter a day for sixteen days.<sup>55</sup> As he drafted, he kept in mind the advice of Clifton Fadiman, who had written in May of 1939,

Remember: short paragraphs, shorter sentences, plenty of illustrations, absence of jargon, absence of polysyllables. Do not reason via syllogisms or at least do not

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53. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, March 3, 1939, box 58, "Kip-HTRAB Ch 8" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

54. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, February 24, 1939, box 58, "How to Read a Book Misc" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

55. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, [ca. 1939], box 58, "Kip-HTRAB Ch 8" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

seem to. Introduce humor wherever possible. Make everything concrete. KEEP THE READER IN MIND. THIS IS A BOOK FOR HIM, NOT FOR YOU. Do not assume your reader knows anything at all about current educational controversies, Aristotle, or your whole point of view in general. Have more and shorter chapters, rather than fewer and longer ones.<sup>56</sup>

In this letter, Fadiman draws upon the slogan of Simon & Schuster to “Give the Reader a Break” with books that were readable and interesting.<sup>57</sup> *How to Read a Book* was written in a whole new style for Adler, who had previously published academic monographs on philosophy, and the staff at Simon & Schuster had some concerns about his ability to deliver a book for a general, middlebrow audience.

Fortunately, Adler had the benefit of incorporating feedback from at least four outside readers before sending the manuscript to Fadiman and his wife, Pauline Rush.<sup>58</sup> Rush was the only female reader of this early draft and served to represent the average reader that Adler and Fadiman planned to target with *How to Read a Book*, and her notes on the draft were honest and forthright. After several pages of highly critical notes, Rush closed her comments with the final remark, “I enjoyed reading this book enormously....But if it is a popular book as it now stands then I’m—just mistaken.”<sup>59</sup> Adler was initially infuriated by Rush’s assessment that he had not successfully written to a mass audience and disagreed with her entirely, but after further feedback from Fadiman, he came to realize that her critique was accurate. Through other readers’ feedback and his own

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56. Clifton Fadiman to Mortimer Adler, May 16, 1939, box 58, “Kip-HTRAB Ch 8” folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

57. Al Silverman, *The Time of Their Lives: The Golden Age of Great American Book Publishers, Their Editors and Authors* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), 247-48.

58. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, July 20, 1939, box 58, “Kip-HTRAB Ch 8” folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

59. Pauline Rush, “Notes on M. J. Adler’s Book on Reading” August 1939, box 58, “Kip-HTRAB Ch 8” folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

revision process, he had come to make all of the changes she, his only female respondent, had initially suggested. Apologizing to Rush through a letter to Fadiman (though continuing his misogyny), Adler wrote, “I’m a dope for not having seen it at once; worse than a dope, I’m guilty of needing you to reinforce Polly’s criticisms before I was willing to see their soundness.”<sup>60</sup> In hindsight, Adler recognizes the significance of Rush’s feedback, but he is only able to do so after her comments were reinforced by his male readers. Although he recognizes that he was wrong to refuse her feedback earlier, he does not apologize to Rush directly but rather apologizes to her through a letter to her husband in a further act of disrespect. Rush stands in for Adler’s middlebrow audience, which, whether Adler had recognized it or not, had become increasingly female, to provide him with revision notes to shift his discourse from academic to popular. Without her input, *How to Read a Book* may not have been nearly so successful in mediating reading processes for the common, non-academic reader.

A defining feature of book list books as a genre is an ideal reader who is motivated to undergo self-education, and this period is no exception. Because of his experience using education in an attempt to escape the limitations of his Jewish immigrant family’s background, Adler structures his book list book around the promises of self-education to make oneself anew regardless of circumstances. As early as March 1939, in an initial pitch letter to Clifton Fadiman, Adler identified three groups as part of his intended audience for *How to Read a Book*: the general public, educators, and students.<sup>61</sup> The

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60. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, September 1939, box 58, “Kip-HTRAB Ch 8” folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

61. Mortimer Adler to Clifton Fadiman, March 3, 1939, box 58, “Kip-HTRAB Ch 8” folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

common thread between these three groups is an educational system that Adler believed failed to teach people how to read in high school, college, and even graduate school. These readers possess average literacy, but they lack the skills to read well and the taste to know what they should read, a problem that Adler blames on both a cluttered curriculum and teachers at all levels who do not know how best to teach students to read.<sup>62</sup>

Adler encapsulates this audience in a seeming paradox by describing *How to Read a Book* as “a book for readers who cannot read.”<sup>63</sup> In a direct attack on the education system, Adler presents evidence indicating that the average American reader in the first part of the twentieth century remained at a sixth-grade level, a problem he attributes to a focus on content knowledge in the schools before reading and writing were fully mastered. College education did not remediate these reading deficits in its curriculum. As a result, even Ivy League universities produced graduates whom Adler would not consider liberally educated because they were not equipped to read the great books and, in fact, had not read them.<sup>64</sup> A concern for deficiencies in readers’ educational backgrounds is a common theme in book list books throughout the time period covered in this dissertation, but in the 1930s those deficiencies had become apparent to the general public through press coverage of the great books in higher education, leading to a greater desire for mediation that would allow middlebrow readers to improve their reading skills outside of formal educational channels.

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62. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 80.

63. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 3.

64. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 90-91.

Despite the fact that he worked directly with working-class and immigrant readers at the People's Institute and with female reader Pauline Rush in the early draft of his book list book, Adler often disregards the diversity of his likely readers. There is not enough extant evidence to reveal much about the demographics of Adler's actual reading audience, but given the diversity of his reading groups and lecture attendees as well as the bestseller status of the book and a review discussing its importance for Black readers, which I will discuss later in this chapter, it can safely be assumed that the audience of *How to Read a Book* was not restricted to a single gender, race, ethnicity, or class. Adler refers to a male reader throughout *How to Read a Book* and frequently uses sports analogies that would appeal to a reader with leisure time. He never explicitly discusses non-white readers. Perhaps this, too, is a result of his upbringing in a Jewish immigrant family in the early twentieth century. Irving Howe finds that, in the 1930s, intellectuals from Jewish immigrant families had distanced themselves from their Jewish identities to the extent that they could.<sup>65</sup> By omitting an acknowledgement of diversity from his book list book, Adler signals that his assimilation into mainstream American culture is complete and writes from a place of mainstream cultural authority. In doing so, he implicitly acknowledges to his readers that assimilation to white, male Western culture is necessary to gain the benefits of a liberal education, an assertion that will come into question later in the twentieth century.

Many book list books begin with arguments for spending one's time on reading, expounding upon the benefits and pleasures of reading good books. In *How to Read a Book*, however, Adler largely takes for granted that reading needs no defense and focuses

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65. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 559.

his effort on instruction instead. Given the effort involved in reading in the manner that Adler recommends and the fact that Adler provides little defense or promotion of reading, his intended audience must already have a deep respect for reading and desire to improve their reading practices. While introducing his text and approach to this intended audience, Adler takes ample space outlining the self-motivation that learning how to read well will require. He does not align with the shortcuts that some other programs take, but rather insists that learning to read well requires both time and effort. One cannot learn to read well in the Harvard Classics' mere fifteen minutes per day,<sup>66</sup> an amount of time Adler finds "ridiculously insufficient."<sup>67</sup> Certainly there were many actual readers of *How to Read a Book* who would never fully adopt Adler's reading practices, but the ideal readers Adler envisions for his text will both recognize that they cannot read well and sincerely desire to improve their reading through regular effort. *How to Read a Book's* ideal middlebrow readers, regardless of their backgrounds or previous opportunities, not only believe that it is possible to gain a liberal education through auto-didacticism but are also motivated to put forth the effort needed to undergo purposeful self-education in their leisure time, even when that leisure time might be marked by the exhaustion of having spent the day tending children or working at a factory or office.

In the words of its preface, *How to Read a Book* is "a light book about heavy reading."<sup>68</sup> Given his intended audience of average readers, Adler cannot write his own

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66. The concept of reading the classics in increments of only fifteen minutes per day was popularized by Charles W. Eliot's 1909 "Five-Foot Shelf of Books," also known as the Harvard Classics. Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 27-29.

67. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 337.

68. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, vii. These words were actually written by Clifton Fadiman in response to a draft of the book. Revision notes by Clifton Fadiman [ca. 1939], box 58, "Kip-HTRAB Ch 8" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.



book in the style of the great books and have it be an effective tool for those who are still learning how to read at such levels. Instead, Adler uses a straightforward writing style that is appropriate for middlebrow mediation—hence, a light book about heavy reading—to outline reading processes that will show his audience how to become proficient readers of more challenging texts. This concept illustrates the possible modes of reading that a single reader may engage in. Adler’s text is written at such a level that the average reader (who, remember, Adler does not think can truly read) is capable of reading and comprehending it. That same reader can then use what they have learned from *How to Read a Book* to use a different, mediated mode of reading to approach the great books, books that might typically be considered “highbrow” because they had previously been accessed largely through elite, formalized education. Readers who are drawn to *How to Read a Book* and follow the methods Adler outlines will engage in a middlebrow mode of reading in order to gain a liberal education, and the social benefits associated with it, for themselves.

#### **“A Runaway Best-Seller!”: Promoting *How to Read a Book***

*How to Read a Book* was especially appealing to booksellers and even competing publishers because it was a means to make additional sales beyond the title itself. An article published in *Publishers’ Weekly* shortly after the release of *How to Read a Book* describes the effective displays that some booksellers created to promote *How to Read a Book* alongside the books on Adler’s list.<sup>69</sup> The Scribner Book Store developed a window display that featured copies of *How to Read a Book* as well as the great books in first editions, rare editions, and low-cost editions such as those from Everyman’s Library and

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69. “How to Read a Classic,” *Publishers’ Weekly*, March 16, 1940, 1147-48.

the Modern Library. A later issue of *Publishers' Weekly* includes an image of a similar window display at Macy's, which reported excellent sales as a result.<sup>70</sup> The presence of *How to Read a Book* and its recommendations at a department store like Macy's, where it could be sold alongside clothing and housewares, is evidence of the postwar commodification of not only books, but the great books. The great books idea had become widespread enough that it made sense to market the great books to a department store audience, which would have been refined, middle class, and largely female. Whereas Lubbock's original audience learned his recommendations from his lecture at an educational institution, Macy's shoppers could simply pick up Adler's recommendations with a new bottle of perfume.

While neither booksellers nor Adler make any suggestion that reading the texts will be easy, these bookseller displays did make it easier for readers to acquire the titles on Adler's list, bringing them all the closer to reading the great books and driving book sales more broadly. Because of the ability of *How to Read a Book* to create returning customers making multiple purchases, booksellers may have been more interested in selling Adler's title, thereby contributing to its early success. *How to Read a Book* is an access point for readers to engage in a mediated and purposeful middlebrow mode of reading, but it also illustrates the connection between middlebrow reading and consumerism. Not only can readers purchase an education program in a neat package, but publishers and booksellers also see the compounding possibilities of selling book list books, as evidenced by the *Publishers' Weekly* features, and promote them all the more.

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70. "The Spring Books Keep Selling," *Publishers' Weekly*, April 20, 1940, 1559-60.

Additional publicity for *How to Read a Book* included author talks, radio interviews, and advertising in all sorts of print publications, from college newspapers to major magazines. These advertisements took the form of small blurbs and full-page spreads, but three advertisements in particular stand out because variations on them were used frequently. These advertisements establish a widespread problem with Americans' reading abilities in publications with audiences who had a greater than average interest in reading books. They then present *How to Read a Book* as a solution to this reading problem because of its indirect mediation focused on the process of reading. This encourages readers to engage in a middlebrow mode of reading so that they have the mediation they need to gain the benefits of a liberal education outside of formal schooling.

“A Book for All of Us Who Realize How Little We Learned at School”<sup>71</sup> connects the great books idea, which was primarily located in higher education at elite institutions, with auto-didacticism. This advertisement appeared in the well-respected and internationally circulated *New York Times* and the *New York Times Book Review* in early March of 1940. Because the advertisement in the *New York Times Book Review* ran in the Sunday edition, it would have had the full circulation of the *Times*, though its appearance in the *Book Review* and the Books section of the newspaper targets those who are already interested in reading books.

The advertisement features an image of the book's cover in three dimensions and tilted at a slight angle beside three paragraphs of text. The copy establishes an insidious problem or deficiency, describing *How to Read a Book* as “a book for all of us who feel

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71. “A Book for All of Us Who Realize How Little We Learned at School” (advertisement), *New York Times Book Review*, March 10, 1940, 40.

that something has gone wrong with our education but do not know what the trouble is.” The advertisement itself identifies the source of this trouble: “most people think they know how to read a book. But this one will make them realize that the basic technique of proper reading is unknown to most of us who consider ourselves well-read.” Although this statement would likely shock *New York Times Book Review* readers, the advertisement assures them that they are not to blame because the education system has failed them. After drawing readers’ attention to a problem they hadn’t previously recognized, the advertisement then positions *How to Read a Book* as a solution that will teach readers how to read properly by establishing basic rules. Furthermore, the advertisement promises that *How to Read a Book* will provide the instructional mediation that formal educational systems lacked, allowing readers to obtain a liberal education at home. This advertisement illustrates a shift in the readers targeted by middlebrow cultural arbiters. Whereas Lubbock’s proto-middlebrow readers may not have had much formal education at all and are making up for the education they haven’t had access to by reading on their own, Adler’s readers are assumed to have completed high school or even college but must work to make up for the failures of that educational system by teaching themselves how to read properly as adults.

As *How to Read a Book* quickly became successful, the advertising campaign used that success to continue driving sales. Many advertisements featured the headline “A Runaway Best-Seller!” in bold font and all capital letters, and the advertisement was regularly updated with recent sales figures for *How to Read a Book*. “A Runaway Best-Seller!” ran in the *New York Times Books* section, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*, the main competition for the *Times* in the first half of the

twentieth century. The *New York Herald Tribune* had a reputation as a “writer’s paper” and was the first paper to have a section devoted to book reviews, which was led by Irita Van Doren, the sister-in-law of Adler’s teaching mentor, Mark Van Doren, making it a logical choice to reach those most interested in reading.<sup>72</sup>

An especially detailed version of the sales figure advertisement was published as a full page in *The New York Times Book Review* on March 31, 1940, less than a month after *How to Read a Book* was released.<sup>73</sup> The three dimensional image of the book’s cover once again appears in this advertisement, this time taking up nearly one quarter of the page. To the right of the book cover is a chart listing each of six printings, how many copies were included in each printing, when the printing was ordered, and the status of the printings ordered after the original publication: “sold out,” “nearly sold out,” and “now on press.” At the bottom of the chart is written, “Total 40,000 copies since publication 3 weeks ago.” The passage below builds on the frenzy initiated by this chart, warning readers that “it has been literally impossible to keep this book in stock,” boasting that “everyone is talking about it” as it refers to the many ways in which booksellers were desperately trying to restock the title. The advertisement then reproduces passages from *How to Read a Book* reviews in *The New Yorker*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *Time Magazine*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. Because this advertisement includes so much text and relies upon familiarity with notable book review sources, it is

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72. Sam Roberts, “Recalling a ‘Writer’s Paper’ as a Name Fades,” *New York Times City Room*, March 6, 2013, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/fondly-recalling-a-paper-that-punched-the-times-in-the-nose/>

73. “A Runaway Best-Seller” (advertisement), *New York Times Book Review*, March 31, 1940, 11.

clearly intended to appeal to people who already read and want to continue improving their skills.

The “runaway best-seller” line and use of sales figures to promote the book create a sense of urgency, encouraging readers to order their copies as soon as possible so that they can be part of the conversation that it claims “everyone” is having. “A Runaway Best-Seller” situates *How to Read a Book* as part of a larger middlebrow project in which cultural arbiters provide mediation for the great books in packages intended to reach a large audience while turning a profit. Furthermore, this advertisement invites readers to participate in what it characterizes as a nationwide conversation (a claim that may have some grounding given the popularity of the great books idea and the book’s sales figures), pointing to the outwardly oriented purposes for middlebrow reading in the first part of the twentieth century. By buying and reading Adler’s book and the great books it recommends, the advertisement argues, readers will gain entry into these larger conversations, which may in turn lead to social advancement through the accumulation of cultural capital.

In the opening chapter of *How to Read a Book*, Adler considers one situation in which the average reader reads with the thoroughness outlined in his instructional chapters: “when they are in love and are reading a love letter, they read for all they are worth.”<sup>74</sup> When reading a love letter, a reader reads the same words over and over again, considering the relationships between the different parts, what each word choice might mean, and how it all relates to the surrounding context. The advertisement “How to Read

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74. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 14.

a Love Letter”<sup>75</sup> narrativizes this example. On April 30, 1940, this advertisement took up nearly an entire page in *The Daily Maroon*, the daily student newspaper at the University of Chicago, the prestigious university where Adler was teaching. The top third of the advertisement features a painting of a young man lying on his stomach outside with brows furrowed, pouring over a letter that has been torn out of its envelope. Below, taking up nearly half the passage, is a long narrative describing the young man’s process of reading such a letter, extrapolating from Adler’s original example. The passage then suggests that readers should read books with the same concentration as they exert upon love letters and offers *How to Read a Book* as a clear guide to reading well.

Because there is so much text and the advertisement appeared in a university newspaper, “How to Read a Love Letter” is again intended for those who already read, a potential disconnect that it accounts for by once again placing blame on the school system. In order to illustrate that the inability to read properly is a systemic issue that affects most Americans, the “How to Read a Love Letter” advertisement draws upon Clifton Fadiman as an example, mentioning his credentials and quoting the notable line from his *New Yorker* review: “from *How to Read a Book* I have actually learned how to read a book.” If someone like Fadiman can both publicly admit to his reading deficiencies and recommend the “clear and helpful” mediation of *How to Read a Book* to overcome them, the advertisement argues, surely the student or faculty reader of *The Daily Maroon* would also benefit. “How to Read a Love Letter” also appeals to the middlebrow desire for purposeful reading by identifying *How to Read a Book*’s audience as “all of us who would like to make great books as much a part of ourselves as we did

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75. “How to Read a Love Letter” (advertisement), *Daily Maroon*, April 30, 1940, 5.

the first love letter we ever received.” Adler’s great books course was well known at the University of Chicago and greater Chicago, but not all *Daily Maroon* readers would have been eligible to enroll. “How to Read a Love Letter” offers *How to Read a Book* as a way to engage with the popular great books idea outside of the classroom setting and promises self-transformation as a result. That a book that insists its readers does not know how to read was promoted on a college campus, particularly one as highly intellectual as the University of Chicago, would seem ironic. However, it is in line with Adler’s argument that even those who have earned advanced degrees from elite institutions lacked basic reading skills. Although it does not say as much, the *Daily Maroon* advertisement urges students not to rely on the university for their education but rather to take it into their own hands by engaging in a middlebrow mode of reading.

### ***How to Read a Book* Reviews**

In part because *How to Read a Book* was so well promoted in advance of publication, the book also received publicity in the form of book reviews in major periodicals shortly after it was published. These reviews were largely favorable, briefly summarizing the book’s content before recommending it enthusiastically. Several of these reviews were excerpted on the dust jacket of *How to Read a Book*’s later printings, such as this passage from the March 10, 1940 *New York Times Book Review*:

“How to Read a Book” is written with such verve and vigor as to fill the reviewer’s mind with the vain desire to quote and quote again. Since that is impossible the reviewer must be content with recommending. This is not one of those how-to books which beckon to a royal road that doesn’t exist, or offer guidance to a goal that is not worth seeking; it is a serious and valuable invitation to an enrichment of personal life and an abler meeting of public responsibility.<sup>76</sup>

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76. “On Getting a Liberal Education,” *The New York Times Book Review*, March 10, 1940, 4.



Here, the reviewer recommends *How to Read a Book* within the context of self-help literature, a genre that had exploded in the wake of Dale Carnegie's 1936 *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Although Carnegie is not named in this review, the reviewer's contrast with ineffective self-help books suggests that the market was so flooded with them by 1940 that readers both craved self-improvement and hesitated to waste their time and money on books that didn't deliver on their promises. Furthermore, the reviewer's characterization of *How to Read a Book* as an effective self-help book points to a middlebrow desire for mediation in the form of clearly outlined steps to dramatically improve the self during this time period. However, there are substantial differences between Carnegie's self-help and Adler's. Carnegie's book is explicitly about getting ahead in the world. In contrast, the middlebrow mode of reading that Adler advances in *How to Read a Book* is much more nuanced. While the social advancements that cultural capital can afford are certainly one purpose for reading the great books, there are also, as the *New York Times* review notes, other benefits to both the inner life of the individual reader and the to the larger society when its citizens are better educated.

A review by Ruth Byrns, published by *America* on March 30, 1940, extends the importance of *How to Read a Book* beyond self-help:

This is an important book. Regard it as absolutely required reading if you are at all interested in becoming better educated yourself or if you are at all concerned with changing the direction of American education. After you have read it you will find yourself recommending it to everyone you know. If enough students read it and begin to demand their rights, and if enough parents read it and begin to insist that their children receive the intellectual training which today's schools do not give, the present educational system will "blow up." The book is that important.<sup>77</sup>

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77. Ruth Byrns, "The Art of Becoming Educated," *America*, March 30, 1940, 693.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, empowering readers to remediate their own education due to the flaws of the curriculum and the seeming inability of teachers to teach reading well was one of Adler's primary reasons for writing this book. While *How to Read a Book* may not have "blown up" the American educational system, Byrns' review does indicate that Adler's radical message regarding the importance of liberal education came across to readers outside of his own circle within higher education.

Book reviewers also recognized *How to Read a Book*'s potential to improve the nation at large through self-education. At the beginning of World War II, when enemy propaganda was a serious concern and women had been able to vote for only twenty years, C. R. Morey echoes Adler's call for readers to read the great books in order to preserve democracy:

Reading with the mind upturned to better intellects is the best training for the development of analytical and critical power, archaic as this may sound in a fact ridden world. And the power to criticize and evaluate was never more needed, never more *widely* needed, through all the classes of our people, than now. In a world obsessed by propaganda, the critical faculty must be ever alert—as never before—and present education is doing little for it....The hope lies apparently in the spread and refinement of adult education, which is still free, *Dieu merci*, "from the control of teachers' colleges and schools of education," and here this book is of serious significance and value.<sup>78</sup>

While few of the great books explicitly endorse democracy as a political system, this argument, which is not unique to Morey, uses reading the great books as a means to sharpen critical thinking skills, which is essential for citizens in a well-functioning democracy. The critique of the current educational system's ability to teach these critical reading skills, a common thread in many reviews of *How to Read a Book*, emerges here

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78. C. R. Morey, "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *Commonweal* 32 (June 7, 1940): 149–50.

as well. However, Morey's interest in adult education that is untouched by educators, suggesting that adult learners are better off outside of elite institutions that they may not have access to anyway, is complicated by the fact that *How to Read a Book* was written by a well-known professor at the University of Chicago. Nonetheless, Morey advocates for adults to educate themselves for the purpose of bettering themselves and society.

Harry McNeill expresses a similar belief in uplift—this time, racial uplift—through self-education in his book review in *Interracial Review*, a monthly journal published by the Catholic Interracial Council:

Mr. Adler's book should have special significance for thoughtful Negroes. The schooling available to Negroes has never been as ample as that for whites. Dr. Adler consoles Negroes with the thought that they have not missed much. Moreover, he brings them the same message of hope that he brings to all groups who feel the need of a liberal education. Why cannot Negroes start reading clubs and discussion groups throughout the country? These will be better than nothing and may ultimately prove superior to what is offered by the educational system. Dr. Adler assures us from *experience* that the beginnings can be extremely modest and professional guidance very limited. Self-help has characterized the great Negro advances up from slavery. Perhaps Dr. Adler has hit upon the crucial means of implementing the freedom of the Negro, alas too often fictional. Does he not indicate a self-made road to enlightenment, to the truth that makes men free?<sup>79</sup>

This review not only praises *How to Read a Book*'s possibilities for self-education, but also connects a book that most likely had a majority white readership to a longstanding interest in racial uplift for Black readers (and here he makes no distinction between Black readers from different classes, geographical areas, or education backgrounds). Even if the educational system is not equal, McNeill suggests, the way in which Adler has made his reading instruction and book list available to anyone who can access a copy of his book means that anyone could take advantage of these strategies. In his review of *How to Read*

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79. Harry McNeill, "Review of How to Read a Book, by Mortimer Adler," *Interracial Review* 8 (June 1940): 97.

*a Book*, McNeill harkens back to the ideas of racial uplift initiated by W.E.B. Du Bois in the late nineteenth century, suggesting that the actions of individuals can uplift the entire race.<sup>80</sup> Here, a mediated middlebrow mode of reading becomes a means for auto-didacticism with the much larger purpose of uplifting a race that has historically lacked access to formal education. Of course, there is also a tension present here. By suggesting that Black readers could use Adler's book to gain a liberal education and as a result advance in society, McNeill to some extent ignores the systemic racism at work. While he does acknowledge that Black people have not had the same access to education as white people have, he encourages Black readers to use Adler's book to educate themselves outside of that system rather than fighting to change the educational system to be more equitable. McNeill's is the only book review that discusses *How to Read a Book* in the context of racial uplift—and unfortunately there are no published reviews that discuss *How to Read a Book*'s course of reading in the context of other minority readers—but the result of using Adler's book in the manner McNeill suggests could be a whole new means of education outside of formalized systems.

Of course, reviews of *How to Read a Book* also included criticism. For example, in the *New York Herald Tribune*, Albert Guerard questions the reading problem that Adler identifies, suggesting that perhaps people tend to look back on previous generations as better than their own because only the exemplars survive.<sup>81</sup> In the *Saturday Review*,

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80. Elizabeth McHenry examines these issues in relation to Black readers in the late nineteenth century in *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). In "The Book Circle: Black Women Readers and Middlebrow Taste in Chicago, 1943-1953," Mary Unger unpacks these issues of Black racial uplift through middlebrow reading in the decade following the publication of Adler's book list book.

81. Albert Guerard, "Culture Through the Great Books of the Past: Mortimer Adler Advises Intellectual Fletcherizing for True Literacy," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, March 31, 1940. 3.

Jacques Barzun praises the instruction that Adler provides but wonders what sort of readers it might produce. He asks whether Adler's mediation will produce "a working mind"—in the sense of independent critical thinking—in addition to the ability to formally analyze texts,<sup>82</sup> and given the prescribed system of reading instruction that I will discuss in further detail in the next section, this critique is well founded. A final critique in Guerard's review notes the scope of *How to Read a Book*, the title of which Guerard finds misleading. After suggesting that acquiring culture by reading the great books "works poorly in science, better in history, best in philosophy,"<sup>83</sup> Guerard then offers up his own editing: "I should therefore, in the interest of that clear thinking so dear to Dr. Adler, reword his title: *How to Read a Scientific or Philosophical Book*; and for the same reason I should delete the sub-title: *The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, for that would take another book which Dr. Adler is quite conscious he has not written."<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Adler's own editorial process indicates that he and others involved in the making of *How to Read a Book* were aware of these limitations, and the addition of sections on reading different genres had been an attempt to remedy these deficiencies.<sup>85</sup> Barzun, however, identifies an issue that is not accounted for in *How to Read a Book*. Throughout the text, Adler focuses on the pursuit of "truth," but he then includes a list of authors that, in Barzun's opinion, "expounds at least half a dozen irreconcilable views of the world"

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82. Jacques Barzun, "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *Saturday Review*, March 9, 1940. 7.

83. Guerard, "Culture Through the Great Books of the Past," 3. What Guerard perceives as a limitation could be seen as an advantage for female readers, who would have been assumed to have less interest in the sciences at this time.

84. Guerard, "Culture Through the Great Books of the Past," 3.

85. Clifton Fadiman to Mortimer Adler, September 7, 1939, box 58, "Kip-HTRAB Ch 8" folder, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

without allowing for relativism.<sup>86</sup> Adler's mediation enables readers to understand and discuss these writers, but not to reconcile their diverse perspectives—an essential skill for a liberally-educated mind. Despite these critiques, however, both Barzun and Guerard ultimately recommend *How to Read a Book* as an effective, though imperfect, self-improvement book.

Clifton Fadiman's glowing review in *The New Yorker* presents a conflict of interest illustrating the potential dangers of middlebrow mediation. For those who weren't aware of his roles outside of the magazine, Fadiman chooses not to disclose his personal relationship with Adler or that he was a key figure in publishing *How to Read a Book* with Simon & Schuster. Instead, Fadiman positions himself as his reader's equal, making reference to "the passive blotting up of words that you and I call reading" and, before presenting a reproduction of Adler's list of authors, asking, "with how many have you a nodding or even a dozing acquaintance? I refuse to tell you how wretchedly low my own score is."<sup>87</sup> Fadiman clinches his review by giving perhaps the highest praise possible from a notable book reviewer: "From 'How to Read a Book' I have actually learned how to read a book."<sup>88</sup> This quotation is then reproduced in a bright yellow band on the front dust jacket of *How to Read a Book*. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, it was actually *Fadiman* who taught *Adler* a great deal about reading during their "General Honors" days at Columbia, and Fadiman contributed substantially to *How to Read a Book* in an editorial role bordering upon co-authorship. Fadiman misrepresents his own position in

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86. Barzun, "Review of *How to Read a Book*," 6-7.

87. Clifton Fadiman, "How to Read a Book," *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1940. 86.

88. Clifton Fadiman, "How to Read a Book," 86.

relation to the book in order to use his status as book reviewer to promote the title. Given Fadiman's experience with reading and contributions to *How to Read a Book*, his book review is likely false testimony for the mediation Adler provides, and it calls into question his integrity as a book reviewer who himself provides mediation for readers.<sup>89</sup> Simon & Schuster did not seem to have these ethical concerns and used passages from Fadiman's review in many of their promotional materials for the book. While certainly a conflict of interest—and one that Fadiman later acknowledged<sup>90</sup>—Fadiman's review contributed significantly to the sales of *How to Read a Book*.

In his autobiography, Adler credits the success of *How to Read a Book* to the confluence of publicity and good luck. The new great books program at St. John's College had attracted some attention, and *Life* magazine published a story on St. John's that connected it to *How to Read a Book* in advance of the March release date. Bookstores embraced *How to Read a Book* and developed displays that brought together it, images from *Life*, and editions of the great books on Adler's list. And, of course, *How to Read a Book* had the benefit of many favorable reviews published within the first weeks and months after its release. As a result, *How to Read a Book* quickly became a

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89. For more on the tension between book reviews as promotion and book reviews as criticism, see Rubin, "The 'Higher Journalism' Realigned: Stuart Pratt Sherman, Irita Van Doren, and *Books*" in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

90. Fadiman writes, "The fact is that no reviewer is really objective when dealing with a friend's book, for if the book has anything to it at all, he is really dealing with the friend himself. He does the best he can, trying not to crack his spine in an attempt to lean over backward. But I doubt the final accuracy of his judgment. For example, I have praised rather heatedly two books by close friends of mine: Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* and Oscar Levant's *A Smattering of Ignorance*. I still do not know whether these books are as good as I made them out to be. On rereading my admittedly amiable pieces, I detect no conscious dishonesty." Clifton Fadiman, *Reading I've Liked: A Personal Selection Drawn from Two Decades of Reading and Reviewing Presented with an Informal Prologue and Various Commentaries* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1941), 3-4.

bestseller.<sup>91</sup> Although Simon & Schuster had been hopeful, they were ill prepared for the success of *How to Read a Book*: the first printing was only 3,500 copies.<sup>92</sup> At the beginning of 1941, *Publishers Weekly* placed *How to Read a Book* second on its 1940 nonfiction bestseller list for having sold 72,000 copies,<sup>93</sup> over twenty times the number of that initial printing. The book remained popular, and in 1972 Adler released a heavily revised edition with coauthor Charles Van Doren, Mark Van Doren's son, that is still widely available today. As a result of all of this publicity, *How to Read a Book* was able to reach a wide audience of middlebrow readers.

### **How to Read a Book and Which Books to Read**

If the many thousands of people who purchased *How to Read a Book* hoped to learn, like Clifton Fadiman, how to actually read a book, they would be pleased to find that Adler spends eight of his seventeen chapters outlining prescriptive reading processes. Adler insists that a book requires three readings, each for a different purpose. While these readings may initially take place separately in order to focus on their distinct purposes, with practice, readers should eventually be able to undertake all three types of readings simultaneously.<sup>94</sup> Throughout *How to Read a Book*, Adler expands upon the aims of each reading, developing a nesting doll of rules, each with extensive details and examples. This extensive, though indirect, mediation allows readers who follow his rules to truly understand what they read, allowing them to improve reading abilities, gain a liberal education, and become critical thinkers. This vision of the middlebrow mode of reading

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91. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 204.

92. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 203.

93. "Best Sellers of 1940," *The Publishers' Weekly*, January 18, 1941, 226–28.

94. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 119.



in 1940 is a far cry from the surface-level summaries that middlebrow critics like Woolf and Macdonald scoffed at. For middlebrow readers to gain cultural capital in order to advance, they would have to study and work hard so that they can gain a liberal education without the support of an in-person teacher or classroom environment.

In the first reading, the reader analyzes the book's structure by looking for the overall argument of the text, the elements that make up that argument, and the problem that the author seeks to solve. This reading begins by assessing the book's title and front matter to determine what kind of book it is. Adler writes,

There are enough books—the great books of the past and many good contemporary books—which are perfectly clear in their intention and which, therefore, deserve a discriminating reading from us. The first rule of reading requires us to be discriminating.... you must know what kind of book you are reading, and you should know this as early in the process as possible, preferably before you begin to read.<sup>95</sup>

Given the context and explanation Adler provides, he likely uses the word “discriminating” in the sense of differentiating between different types of books so that the reader can consider a text as a work of philosophy, science, etc. However, a “discriminating” person can also be someone who has good taste. This dual meaning reflects Adler's readers' progression from determining the type of books in front of them to developing good taste. Once readers have classified a text, they may begin their first reading. Their goal in this first reading is to be able to say what the text is about in a single sentence and to outline the parts of the text and indicate how they relate to one another. Adler illustrates this outlining process through several sample summaries, which he uses as an argument for reading the great books: “the most readable book is an architectural achievement on the part of the author. The best books are those that have the

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95. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 141.

most intelligible structure and, I might add, the most apparent. Though they are usually more complex than poorer books, their greater complexity is somehow also a great simplicity, because their parts are better organized, more unified.”<sup>96</sup> In contrast, Adler finds that other books are more challenging precisely because the reader must work harder to unearth their structure. The final goal of this first reading is to figure out what problem served as the author’s starting point. Readers need not yet understand the author’s solution to that problem—and indeed the author may not have solved it at all—but the reader should understand where the author began. All of these rules for the first reading may seem very basic, and they are, but the fact that Adler explicitly states each one of them suggests that many readers were not doing this foundational work when they read. As a middlebrow mediator, Adler functions as a remedial schoolteacher, helping his readers gain the skills they should have developed in school. This type of middlebrow mediator, who draws upon their own educational credentials to recreate the classroom for adult independent learners, will fall away over the course of the twentieth century as cultural authority comes into question, though the middlebrow theme of making up for the failures of the educational system will persist.

In the second reading, readers examine how the parts of a text work together to create the argument. The first step in doing so is to make sure that readers fully understand the words, and especially the central terms, that the author uses. Adler suggests that most people tend to read passively, without understanding these central terms. He encourages readers to set aside their pride in order to make sure they fully understand what they read:

If you are reading a book that can increase your understanding, it stands to reason that all its words will not be equally intelligible. If you proceed as if they were all ordinary words, all on the same level of general intelligibility as the words of a

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96. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 164.

newspaper article, you will not make the first step toward an interpretative reading. You might just as well be reading a newspaper, for the book cannot enlighten you if you do not try to understand it.<sup>97</sup>

In order to understand a text's argument, readers must figure out which terms in the text are important and determine the meaning the author has assigned to them. From there, readers will look for connections between words and sentences to uncover the author's argument and determine which of the author's problems were solved and whether any new problems were uncovered. In order to do so, Adler again requests a shift in readers' mindsets: "perhaps you are beginning to see how essential a part of reading it is to be perplexed and know it. Wonder is the beginning of wisdom in learning from books as well as from nature. If you never ask yourself any questions about the meaning of a passage, you cannot expect the book to give you any insight you do not already possess."<sup>98</sup> The entire second reading requires an honest assessment of what readers do and do not already know and understand and an interrogation of the text at hand. Then, in the third reading, the reader determines whether he or she agrees or disagrees with the argument made in the text, which I will discuss further in the next section of this chapter. This progression is significant because many readers tend to jump from a single, incomplete reading to their own critique. Adler emphasizes that deep understanding must precede criticism.

Before readers can follow the rules Adler lays out, they must first understand reading as a learned skill. Most people, Adler argues, take reading for granted as a natural ability. In order to improve their reading, they must recognize that it is not at all natural, but

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97. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 196-97.

98. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 219-20.

rather a complex process that was originally learned and that can be improved through thoughtful practice.<sup>99</sup> This learning will require substantial effort on the part of the reader and can only be self-motivated. In his first chapter, Adler provides the disclaimer that “My help can go no further than you will help yourself.... People often say that they would try to read if they only knew how. As a matter of fact, they might learn how if they would only try. And try they would, if they wanted to learn.”<sup>100</sup> Adler places a strong emphasis on the effort needed for auto-didacticism throughout *How to Read a Book*: purposeful middlebrow reading is not meant to be easy. By emphasizing effort and laying out an extensive list of rules for reading, Adler situates his iteration of a middlebrow mode of reading in direct opposition to the cultural elite’s perceptions of lowbrow reading processes. Readers may be in the habit of “consuming” mass culture, devouring it without questioning or considering it.<sup>101</sup> Adler provides practical instructions that encourage readers to slow down and become active participants in the construction of their own knowledge rather than reading at the surface level, as they are accused of by middlebrow critics.

Just as recommended reading lists make the literary field visible to readers, the rules for reading that Adler describes in *How to Read a Book* make processes of intentional reading visible to readers. Readers want to engage in purposeful reading, but most of them will never have been taught to read in a way that will allow them to understand the

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99. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 4.

100. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 6.

101. As Janice Radway points out, this conception of mass culture reading practices has never been grounded in careful analysis but rather in academic conjecture. Janice A. Radway, “Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor,” *Book Research Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1986): 7–29, accessed May 3, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02684575>.

great books well enough to benefit from their cultural capital. As Adler argues throughout his book, the school system is failing students by focusing on content knowledge before foundational reading skills have been mastered, so even well-educated readers are unlikely to read “well” in the way that Adler describes it.<sup>102</sup> For readers who find themselves failed by the school system and desiring more out of their reading, Adler’s mediation provides access to reading processes that allow readers to educate themselves. Future book list books will continue to respond to and interact with formal educational systems, but Adler’s extensive rules for reading are exclusive to him.

In *How to Read a Book*, mediation takes place in the form of reading processes rather than textual interpretation. Adler doesn’t impose his own interpretations of texts on his readers through the contextual notes, summaries, and analyses that comprise other book list books. Instead, Adler’s mediation takes place indirectly through his establishment of control over the process of reading itself. Adler dogmatically states that proper reading “is done in one way only. Without external help, you take the book into your study and work on it.”<sup>103</sup> Despite this emphasis on reading with no external aids and only “the power of your own mind,”<sup>104</sup> the process that Adler outlines involves a great deal of external help, especially when a reader is just beginning to learn it. Because Adler’s method involves multiple readings, each of which requires attention to various elements of a text, a reader new to this method would need to spend significant time turning back and forth from the primary text to Adler’s rules. In fact, many readers would likely

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102. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 65-100.

103. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 27.

104. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 27.

require a checklist of some sort to ensure that they had adequately addressed Adler's requirements. Although the resultant reading of a text would not be mediated in regard to textual interpretation because Adler provides no such literary criticism, the reading of a text would be heavily influenced by Adler's method, which prioritizes fully understanding an author's ideas before putting forth any criticism as opposed to reading focused on emotional responses, action, and identifying with the characters.<sup>105</sup>

After providing extensive reading instruction, Adler then gives readers a list of texts that they can use to best apply that instruction. Readers may be hesitant to approach the great books, which many perceive as challenging texts. To this concern, Adler responds, "reading good books, or better, the great books, is the recipe for those who would learn to read....from the point of view of therapy, books which cannot be understood at all unless they are read actively are the ideal prescription for anyone who is still a victim of passive reading."<sup>106</sup> If a reader's purpose for reading is to become a better reader and thinker, Adler argues, they must read the great books. It is important to note that this attitude is not shared by all book listmakers, either at this time or throughout history. The question of whether readers should only read the best books, read whatever they find pleasurable, or find some balance between the two has always been, and probably will always be, a matter of debate. The ideal readers of Adler's book will use it to gain access to both reading processes and the "right" books to read. Adler's instructional mediation then

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105. Merve Emre calls this type of reading "bad reading" as opposed to the "good reading" promoted by academic English departments. Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3-4.

106. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 320.

functions to equip them with the skills they need to read the great books, which will in turn improve their reading skills and critical thinking abilities.

Whereas many lists of recommended reading challenge readers to read all of the books on the list, Adler recommends, in his reading list as in his instructional chapters before, that readers focus on reading well rather than reading widely.<sup>107</sup> It isn't necessary to read all of the books on Adler's list, and, in fact, it is much better to read only a few of the books well instead of reading the entirety of the list poorly. To this point, Adler writes, "a list of books should not be regarded as a challenge which you can meet only by finishing every item on it. It should be regarded as an invitation which you can accept graciously by beginning wherever you feel most at home."<sup>108</sup> In comparison to many other lists of recommended reading, such as Asa Don Dickinson's *One Thousand Best Books: The Household Guide to a Lifetime's Reading, A Variorum List Compiled from Many Authoritative Selections*, F. Seymour Smith's *An English Library: An Annotated List of 1300 Classics*, and Francis Beauchesne Thornton's *How to Improve Your Personality by Reading*, containing 1350 book recommendations,<sup>109</sup> the list of great books that Adler includes as his own invitation to reading the great books is relatively brief. It contains only 238 listings, though many of these entries are listed as "works," "tragedies," "comedies," etc., thus including multiple texts within a single listing in the book list. Adler describes the length of his list as "neither too long for the average man's

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107. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 3.

108. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 374.

109. Asa Don Dickinson, *One Thousand Best Books: The Household Guide to a Lifetime's Reading, A Variorum List Compiled from Many Authoritative Selections with Descriptive Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925); F. Seymour Smith, *An English Library: An Annotated List of 1300 Classics* (London: National Book Council, 1944); Thornton, *How to Improve Your Personality by Reading*.

leisure nor too short for those who can manage to find more time”.<sup>110</sup> Adler’s brief list serves as another form of mediation that encourages readers to keep their own purposes for reading in mind, focusing on ideas and threads that interest them and reading well to fully explore those ideas. This, of course, is a difference in reading practices that is enabled by the nature of leisure reading. Whereas university students have to trace lines of inquiry that are largely identified and prioritized by their professors, middlebrow readers are able to follow their own interests as they unfold, which may account for and align with the “desire to *think*” displayed by the early participants in the People’s Institute great books reading groups.

Throughout *How to Read a Book*, Adler criticizes the prevailing understanding of the term “well read” as those who have read many texts because he believes that most of these readers will not have read with the level of understanding that he demands in his instructional chapters. Instead, Adler asks his readers to shift their focus to reading a few texts well rather than reading many texts at only surface level. Adler illustrates his point with a poignant example drawing on the classic thought experiment of shipwrecked island reading:

When [people] are faced with having to choose a very small number, they tend to pick the best. We forget that the total amount of leisure we can rescue from our busy lives is probably no longer than a few years on a desert island. If we realized that, we might make up a list of reading for the rest of our lives as carefully as we would for a desert island. Since we do not have to pack the books in a waterproof case, we can plan on more than ten. Yet we cannot count on eternity.... unless we have laid our plans well and followed them, we are likely to find, when reading time is over, that we might just as well have played golf or bridge, for all the good it did our minds.<sup>111</sup>

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110. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 338.

111. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 337-38.



In this passage, Adler challenges readers' assumptions about the amount of reading time they have available to them and urges them to use it wisely by engaging in a middlebrow mode of reading that will provide a return on their investment. Because time is so limited, it only makes sense to engage in purposeful reading, which for Adler means careful attention to texts that will help readers understand questions or ideas that interest them; mindless reading is a waste of precious time. This conviction that quality of reading is more important than quantity carries through to Adler's recommended reading list.

Adler attempts to be transparent regarding the selection process for his book list, though his criteria are ultimately problematic. He begins with relatively straightforward requirements: that his readers can easily find the book in English, though it may appear in translation, and that the book does not require specialist knowledge to be understood.<sup>112</sup> In keeping with the self-motivated literary education of his earlier chapters, Adler assures readers, "there is nothing here so recondite that it is esoteric, nothing that a little courage will not conquer."<sup>113</sup> These basic criteria ensure that the majority of readers will be able to undertake the reading that Adler recommends, both in terms of their physical access to texts through libraries and bookstores and their linguistic access to texts written in English for a non-specialist audience.

After establishing these initial criteria, Adler seeks to construct the most universal list that he can by selecting texts based on his six qualities of great books:

1. They are "enduring best sellers," though they may not have been so right away.
2. They are written for a wide audience rather than a specialist one.
3. They are timeless.
4. They are readable and reward good reading.
5. Their content is foundational.

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112. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 327.

113. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 374.

6. They “deal with the persistently unsolved problems of human life.”<sup>114</sup>

These six qualities can be distilled further into two larger categories. First, the texts on Adler’s list have appealed to readers over many years. They appeal to different readers in different time periods because they deal with foundational issues of what it means to be human, and they contribute to the big questions and problems of human existence. Second, they are written in such a way that the reading strategies that Adler outlines in his instructional sections are rewarded, and they are foundational works rather than specialized ones.

Using these criteria, Adler compiles his list of the great books with seemingly greater ease than do other listmakers, who often agonize over the difficulty of narrowing their lists. He argues that book lists change very little over time. Instead, he writes, later listmakers add to previous lists of great books rather than completely reinventing them.<sup>115</sup> For Adler, and perhaps for proponents of the great books idea in general, the qualities of great books seem to be completely objective, resulting in a list that is largely white, male, and focused on the Western cultural tradition. Although this narrow view of the canon was certainly influenced by the time in which Adler developed his list and would come into question with the civil rights movement, feminist movement, and culture wars later in the twentieth century, perhaps he also used it to signify his authority, despite his Jewish identity, to make these recommendations. By maintaining a conservative—and, at the time, rather unobjectionable—list, Adler limits the extent to which he rocks the boat, which may make it more permissible to provide instruction on a cultural tradition that

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114. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 328-35.

115. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 324. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the literary canon often changes by way of addition rather than substitution or total reworkings.

wouldn't have been considered his own. Furthermore, because his list is unannotated, he does not provide explanation as to how particular works possess these qualities. Of course, these qualities are in fact quite subjective: there is no way to determine whether one book is more "timeless" than another. Readers aren't equipped to make these judgments on their own, so they must instead rely upon the mediation of cultural arbiters like Adler to determine which books qualify as "great."

Adler provides his recommended reading list, titled "A List of the Great Books," in the form of an appendix. The entries are arranged in chronological order by the author's date of birth, and they include only the author, title, year, and recommended editions for each work. Below is Adler's entry for Aquinas, one of his favorite authors:

33. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS (c. 1225-1274)  
*Of Being and Essence* (1256) . . . . Sheed & Ward  
*Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258-60) R. & T. Washbourne  
*Of the Governance of Rulers* (1265-67) . Sheed & Ward  
*Summa Theologica* (1267-73) . . R. & T. Washbourne<sup>116</sup>

The lack of annotation in the recommended reading list is explained by Adler's approach to proper reading, which he argues is done without outside aid, using only one's mind to connect with the text. If Adler were to provide summaries or analyses of the books he recommends, he would undermine the process that he himself lays out. Instead, he says very little, if anything, about the texts and allows readers to discover them for themselves. This is not to say that Adler's text does not mediate readers' reading, but rather that it does so in a more complex and indirect manner. Book list books that do include annotations tell readers why they should pick up particular texts in the first place and how they should think about those texts. Adler, like many other book listmakers in

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116. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 379.

the first half of the twentieth century, does neither. Instead, the reader must trust Adler's recommendations: they should pick up these texts in the first place because they meet the criteria that Adler has developed, and they should read them using Adler's methods to understand them without external assistance. If readers are to use this list, they must have complete trust in Adler based on his standing as a leading figure in higher education and the Great Books movement.<sup>117</sup> In fact, the dust jacket promotes *How to Read a Book* by drawing upon central institutions of the Great Books movement: "Dr. Adler lists the great books of all time—a list based on similar ones used at the University of Chicago, at Columbia College, at St. John's College, and elsewhere."<sup>118</sup> By placing the support of these institutions behind Adler's list, *How to Read a Book* solidifies its own authority to mediate and dictate readers' reading—a strategy that would be far less effective later in the twentieth century, as universities lost their authority with the general reading public—even without indicating why each text on the list is significant and worthy of readers' time.

Adler also uses Chapter 16, "The Great Books," to place some of the works on his recommended reading list in conversation with one another around specific topics and lines of inquiry.<sup>119</sup> In this chapter, Adler seeks to make the list "come to life" so that "instead of lying side by side in a graveyard row, the books may appear...as they

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117. Certainly not all readers—or even most readers—would have followed Adler's instructions to the letter. However, because I do not have access to the ways in which historical readers used *How to Read a Book*, I am limiting my discussion to Adler's ideal reading practices.

118. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, cover copy for the 15<sup>th</sup> printing of the first edition.

119. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 322-53. Adler would later expand upon this approach of arranging great works according to subject matter in his 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World* for Britannica. For more on this project, see Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture*.

should—the lively actors in a living tradition.”<sup>120</sup> This narrative of recommended reading opens with writings by and influences upon the founding fathers of the United States. By beginning in this way, Adler centers his demonstration of the reading of the great books on the dominant, white, male culture of the United States, again signaling that middlebrow readers must be conversant in that culture to gain the cultural capital benefits of a liberal education. From there, Adler proposes several possible threads of interest that readers could follow, grouping key texts according to their subject matter. Once again, Adler’s reading recommendations align nicely with the instruction he includes earlier in the book. Adler insists throughout *How to Read a Book* that original texts are the best way to transfer ideas and understanding from one generation to the next, and he reminds readers that books exist in conversation with one another, suggesting that they are only difficult if readers do not have the prior knowledge to understand them. Adler reinforces his claim by illustrating a course of reading that allows readers to follow a conversation amongst great books. By reading these texts chronologically, as Adler strongly encourages his readers to do, readers will better understand what they read because they will already be familiar with those works that would have influenced the author’s line of thinking.<sup>121</sup>

Adler’s course of reading in this chapter is another example of indirect mediation, in which Adler gives readers a possible list of what to read, which itself is quite conservative because it includes great books from the Western tradition that had been included on other book lists and wouldn’t fully come into question until later in the

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120. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 327-28.

121. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 351.

twentieth century, and in what order to read but does not tell readers what to think about individual texts. Instead, he demonstrates how texts exist in conversation with one another and encourages them to read in light of this conversation, though he does not acknowledge which writers and texts are excluded from this conversation due to their race, gender, or country of origin. This course of reading also exemplifies another key element of a middlebrow mode of reading: the importance of intentionally developing an intentional plan in order to gain a liberal self-education. To follow a conversational thread, readers must be intentional about establishing a course of reading so that they are able to gain the most from it. Adler asks his readers to choose their reading material just as carefully as they would if they were selecting texts to bring along on a desert island.<sup>122</sup> This requires readers to be focused and intentional, choosing texts that are in conversation with one another so that the readers can then be in conversation with other readers, using their liberal education for social mobility and betterment.

### **Keeping Afloat in the Deeps: Adler's Purposes for Reading the Great Books**

The intentional reading practices modeled in “The Great Books” chapter align with readers’ expectations that their reading be productive and beneficial. Throughout *How to Read a Book*, Adler argues that the great books are the most worthy of readers’ attention and efforts because the great books are most capable of helping readers improve their reading, develop and articulate opinions, and, ultimately, improve society at large. In this way, the reasoning for reading the great books espoused in *How to Read a Book* represents the outwardly-oriented purposes for middlebrow reading that characterized the first half of the twentieth century.

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122. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 337-38.

Although many readers avoid the great books for fear of their difficulty, Adler insists that they are the perfect books for people working to improve their reading. Of the great books, Adler writes, “it is almost as if they were written for the sake of teaching people how to read” because they contain original knowledge that is well organized and clearly communicated.<sup>123</sup> In addition to providing encouragement for readers who may be apprehensive about reading the great books, Adler’s focus on original texts rather than textbooks, digests, or abridged books resists common critiques that suggest middlebrow products water down high culture to make it more accessible to unprepared, socially-motivated consumers. Adler explicitly opposes such shortcuts and directs his readers to the original, complete great books, assuring them that once they know how to read these original texts, they will be able to apply the same skills toward any other kind of reading. However, Adler reminds his readers, by appealing to the presumed male reader’s masculinity, that “the sportsman doesn’t hunt lame ducks.<sup>124</sup>” Although readers will have gained skills that they can apply to any reading, readers will gain more from their reading if they focus on the great books. This means that Adler also encourages readers to continue reading a book even if they find it difficult, boring, or otherwise not to their taste. Adler promotes persistence because the great books, by their very nature, always have something to offer a reader. This perspective on reading the great books exclusively and without regard for readers’ enjoyment indicates a larger focus on purposeful middlebrow reading. For Adler, this is true even when it means reading something that does not initially provide enjoyment. The initial investment of time and effort reading the

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123. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 320.

124. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 64.

great books will pay off with the resulting improvement in the self and the larger society. At this time, middlebrow reading does not need to be pleasurable to be productive.

For Adler, developing and articulating an opinion about what one has read is both a product of and purpose for reading well. Most other book list books published both before and after *How to Read a Book* focus on what to read and why and how to read it. *How to Read a Book* is unusual among book list books, including all of those that I discuss in this dissertation, in that Adler also expects readers to come to their own conclusions about what they have read. Adler indicates that readers will know that they have fully understood a text when they are not only able to repeat back what it is about, but can also state their own opinions about the text thoughtfully and with good reason. Although Adler ostensibly resists reading for the purpose of building social connections, the development of well-reasoned opinions is clearly linked to social aspiration, as the ability to discuss a text and readers' opinions about it is an outward performance of cultural capital, signifying membership in social groups and an ability to connect with others that may lead to personal gains.

Another element that distinguishes Adler's book list book is that he provides explicit reading instruction regarding his final stage of reading: developing an opinion about the text. Adler urges readers to move beyond surface-level opinions such as "I liked it" or "I didn't like it" and offers prompts that readers can use to articulate their opinions about argumentative or nonfiction writing in a way that is both meaningful and fair: "After [the reader] has said, 'I understand but I disagree,' he can make the following remarks: (1) '*You are uninformed*'; (2) '*You are misinformed*'; (3) '*You are illogical, your reasoning is*



*not cogent*’; (4) *‘Your analysis is incomplete.’*”<sup>125</sup> All of these prompts rely upon readers reading well enough to fully understand a text and then carefully considering the text to determine where its faults lie. Just as Adler indirectly mediates his readers’ understanding of original texts by providing thorough instruction intended to shape the way they search for meaning, so too does Adler indirectly mediate readers’ formation and development of opinions about what they read by establishing these ground rules for responding. Adler presents this part of his instruction as intended to help readers develop opinions that are well-informed and fair, but ultimately these parameters limit what readers may feel they can legitimately say and privilege some kinds of responses over others, bringing to mind Jacques Barzun’s question of whether Adler’s methods would result in “a working mind.” Adler deems a simple response of “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it” as insufficient, requiring readers to instead submit to his indirect mediation and use the terms he has prescribed to evaluate what they read and frame their responses. Furthermore, these limitations regarding opinion result in privileging some texts over others, as some texts are more suited to these processes of analysis. If readers use these suggested methods to form their opinions about texts, they will find, as Adler promises, “that good taste in literature is acquired by anyone who learns to read.”<sup>126</sup> Of course, that “good taste” will be heavily influenced by Adler’s indirect mediation, privileging texts, largely written by white men, that meet his great books criteria and rejecting texts that do not align with that tradition.

For Adler, reading the great books also serves a larger purpose. When citizens read the great books, he argues, society as a whole improves. In addition to discussing the

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125. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 256.

126. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 315.

power of reading for social betterment in his preface, Adler devotes an entire chapter of *How to Read a Book*, titled “Free Minds and Free Men,” to the topic. In these passages, Adler explains what he sees as an essential connection between reading the right books well and fostering a society of free-thinking citizens. Though he frequently expresses concern for the protection of democracy, he does not explicitly discuss the development of new voting populations, including women voters and recent immigrants, instead discussing citizenship more generally and without calling out any specific demographic. He writes, “the art of reading well is intimately related to the art of thinking well—clearly, critically, freely.”<sup>127</sup> Free-thinking citizens who are able to comprehend and participate are essential to democracy; therefore, in Adler’s mind, a liberal education, earned by reading the right books in the right way, is also essential to democracy. However, Adler also recognizes that, while knowledge gained through reading is intrinsically good, people must act on that knowledge in order to create a better world. Evoking images of Nazi book burnings, he warns his readers,

[i]f, after you have learned to read and have read the great books, you act foolishly in personal or political affairs, you might just as well have saved yourself the trouble.... Knowledge may be a good in itself, but knowledge without right action will bring us to a world in which the pursuit of knowledge itself is impossible—a world in which books are burned, libraries are closed, the search for truth is repressed, and disinterested leisure lost.<sup>128</sup>

In this regard, Adler’s promotion of the great books is part of a civil project with a lineage developing from the revolutionary war and responding to the circumstances of the world war that was looming as Adler wrote. For Adler, the stakes of middlebrow reading involve not only the transformation of the individual, but also the protection and

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127. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, ix.

128. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 370-71.

promotion of democracy itself, which was under a perceived threat from Nazism and Communism.<sup>129</sup>

Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* illustrates a manifestation of a middlebrow mode of reading as an extension of the great books movement in higher education in the first half of the twentieth century. Adler's mediation is indirect in that he provides clear and thorough reading instruction that will shape readers' interpretations of texts but does not explicate the texts on his reading list. For Adler, all readers must begin with the purpose of learning how to read well. Once they have mastered these reading skills, they will have the ability to read for any other purpose they would like: understanding the great questions and ideas of humanity, gaining a liberal education, or becoming active and well-informed citizens. *How to Read a Book* was just one way in which Adler shaped a nation through his promotion of the great books idea, and it allowed those without access to university courses or adult extension programs to explore the great books on their own. Although Adler's book list book remained in print and popular, the concept of an objective list of best books in the Western tradition would come into question in the second half of the twentieth century, and book list books would have to take their own stance within the debate.

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129. For more on the connection between reading and American democracy, see Kristin L. Matthews, *Reading America: Citizenship, Democracy, and Cold War Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016).

## Chapter 2

### Clifton Fadiman's *Lifetime Reading Plan* and the Changing Canon

For an American in the last decade of the twentieth century, the “global village” is a reality, the world having been shrunk by jet aircraft, by communications satellites, by instantaneous television news from everywhere, and by the Internet, to the extent that, in a sense, nothing is foreign to anyone’s experience. Moreover, the United States, from its origins a nation of immigrants, has been enriched anew in recent years by fresh arrivals from all over the world, one consequence of this being that as a people, our cultural roots have become more diverse than ever before.

—John S. Major, Preface to *The New Lifetime Reading Plan*

The late twentieth century saw a public debate about which cultural works to teach and, by extension, what it meant to be an American. The middlebrow mode of reading had previously provided an opportunity to expose a wide variety of readers to the great books outside of the classroom, thereby building their cultural capital, but during the 1980s and 1990s the very nature of the “great books” came under fire in the United States. A central term of these debates was the “literary canon,” those imaginative literary texts considered to be the greatest and most influential in human history. However, it is important to recognize that this term was sometimes employed less precisely, particularly by those outside of the academy, to reflect any cultural texts that were being taught. As John Guillory notes in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, the concept of the literary canon comes from the scriptural canon, implying a religiously accepted set of texts that are not open to revision or expansion.<sup>1</sup> The literary canon debates were about whether this analogy was fitting, whether the canon should remain

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1. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.

closed or could be opened up to additional authors, including women writers, writers of color, and writers from outside of the United States and Europe. While these debates were ostensibly about what was taught, their outcomes reached far beyond the English classroom. As Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, the literary canon debate “is not just a struggle over the relative merits of literary geniuses; it is a struggle among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself.”<sup>2</sup> Tompkins writes these words in the context of her argument for examining popular literature in terms of the work that it does in a society rather than dismissing it as formally inferior. However, her statement can also be broadened to include canonical representation of women and people of color so that the picture America draws of itself is more accurately diverse.

While book list books have always been implicated in issues of canon formation, in the late twentieth century they were leveraged by both sides of the canon debates. Whereas a college course, often the unit in question when the canon is under discussion, is constrained by the number of readings that can be assigned within a certain number of weeks, a book list book can include as many recommended readings as will fit within its pages. This number could be—and sometimes is—truly massive when annotations are brief or nonexistent. Furthermore, while course syllabi are subject to the requirements of the course description and learning outcomes, department, and university, book list books have a much different sort of accountability to editors, publishers, and the book marketplace. Book list books published in the second half of the twentieth century tend to take clear stances regarding issues of canonicity, either reaffirming the Western canon or

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2. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 201.

opening themselves up to include women writers, writers of color, and writers outside of the Western tradition.

Some book list books continued to reinforce the Western canon in the late twentieth century even as doing so was growing unpopular in higher education. A particularly troubling example is Harold Bloom's 1994 *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*. Throughout, Bloom defends the Western canon from what he calls the "School of Resentment," those seeking to open the canon for the sake of representation. He insists that his selections, amounting to twenty-six authors, nearly all of them white and only four of them women, are based on greatness and that greatness is neither subjective nor arbitrary. In Bloom's eyes, there is no question as to which texts belong in the Western canon because their canonicity is innate to their aesthetic strength, and attempts to open the canon are effectively attempts to destroy it.<sup>3</sup>

Other book list books reflect the opening of the canon in higher education that took place at the end of the twentieth century. The multiple editions of Clifton Fadiman's *The Lifetime Reading Plan* serve as an interesting case study for the opening of the canon. The original 1960 edition, published before these canon debates reached their peak, includes one hundred recommended books representing the traditional, largely white and male, Western canon and organized by genre. Each recommendation is accompanied by a brief, 1-2 page entry promoting the original text.<sup>4</sup> *The Lifetime Reading Plan* was popular enough to warrant new editions in 1978 and 1986. It then received a complete overhaul for the 1997 edition, which was published after the literary canon had begun to open in

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3. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994).

4. Clifton Fadiman, *The Lifetime Reading Plan* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1960).

the context of American education and shortly before Fadiman's death. Fadiman took on coauthor John S. Major to help him expand the *Plan* to include classic Asian and Middle Eastern literature as well as works by women, people of color, and writers outside of Europe and the United States, which was re-released as *The New Lifetime Reading Plan*. The development of *The Lifetime Reading Plan* from a closed Western canon in 1960 to a more open list intended for an American reading audience in 1997 indicates how the middlebrow mode of reading participated in and was shaped by the canon debates in higher education.

### **Clifton Fadiman and His *Lifetime Reading Plan***

Clifton Fadiman's obituary in the *New York Times* sums up his life well: "he learned to read when he was 4 and he never got over it."<sup>5</sup> Fadiman was born in 1904 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents in Brooklyn.<sup>6</sup> Much of Fadiman's adolescent life was devoted to overcoming his circumstances, both by developing a strong work ethic and by escaping his parents' accented English. He describes a turning point at the age of ten, when he "suddenly heard them, as it were," and began carefully studying the English language, trying to sound like the native speakers he recognized as having power and educating himself in the Western tradition.<sup>7</sup> After graduating from high school early, Fadiman became one of "the most brilliant students of his era at Columbia College," where he

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5. Richard Severo, "Clifton Fadiman, a Wordsmith Known for His Encyclopedic Knowledge, Is Dead at 95," *New York Times*, June 21, 1999, B8, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/21/arts/clifton-fadiman-a-wordsmith-known-for-his-encyclopedic-knowledge-is-dead-at-95.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

6. Severo, "Clifton Fadiman," B8.

7. Fadiman quoted in James C. Katz, "An Afternoon with Clifton Fadiman," *Columbia College Today*, Fall 1981/Winter 1982, 32, accessed November 18, 2019, [https://archive.org/details/ldpd\\_12981092\\_024/page/98](https://archive.org/details/ldpd_12981092_024/page/98)

worked an ongoing series of odd jobs to support himself.<sup>8</sup> When Fadiman matriculated at Columbia in 1920, 40 percent of the student population was Jewish. Two years later, only 22 percent of the incoming class was Jewish, and when Fadiman later inquired about joining the English faculty, the department head rejected him with the reasoning, “we have room for only one Jew, and we have chosen Mr. Trilling.”<sup>9</sup> Reflecting upon Fadiman’s position as an outsider, his daughter Anne concludes that his envy for his classmates motivated much of his life and career, driving him to lay his own claim to English language and culture<sup>10</sup>.

Thus prevented from becoming a professor at Columbia, Fadiman instead became what he described as a “hemi-demi-semi-quasi-professor,” a “pitchman-professor, selling ideas, often other men’s at marked-down figures.”<sup>11</sup> This work took many forms, including teaching at a preparatory school and the People’s Institute, serving as an editor at Simon & Schuster and the Book-of-the-Month Club, reviewing books for *The New Yorker*, and, most famously, overseeing the radio program “Information, Please!” as master of ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> These roles positioned Fadiman as a major middlebrow mediator; he saw himself as making challenging ideas accessible and keeping American culture from being overtaken by pulp.<sup>13</sup> In *What America Read*, Gordon Hutner refers to

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8. Katz, “An Afternoon with Clifton Fadiman,” 31.

9. Anne Fadiman, *The Wine Lover’s Daughter: A Memoir*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 84-85; 88. Mr. Trilling was, of course, literary critic Lionel Trilling.

10. Fadiman, *The Wine Lover’s Daughter*, 24.

11. Clifton Fadiman, *Party of One: The Selected Writings of Clifton Fadiman* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Co., 1955), 23.

12. Severo, “Clifton Fadiman,” B8. For an extensive discussion of “Information, Please!” and other literary radio programming, see “Information, Please!: Book Programs on Commercial Radio” in Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*.

13. Fadiman, *Party of One*, 24-25.



Fadiman as “the most influential critic in 1941” due to the success and popularity of his anthology, *Reading I’ve Liked*.<sup>14</sup> Fadiman has also been called “the brightest young man on the air”<sup>15</sup> and “universally trusted and admired.”<sup>16</sup> His work was recognized with the 1993 National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.<sup>17</sup> Fadiman recognized that his role—and, in fact, his success—as a popularizer was the result of a changing world in which the distance between the highly educated and the undereducated was growing, but there was an audience looking for mediation to bridge the gap.

*The Lifetime Reading Plan* developed from one of Fadiman’s many side projects. The book list originally appeared in a 1959 issue of *This Week Magazine*, a Sunday newspaper supplement. Readers followed up with so much correspondence that Fadiman’s publishers suggested he expand the list into a full book.<sup>18</sup> This correspondence enabled Fadiman to know his audience for the book in the same way that Adler had met his audience through his public lectures. Fadiman writes that his *Plan* is “not for the highly educated or even (not always the same thing) the very well-read.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, Fadiman conceives of his audience as “the American, from eighteen to eighty, who is curious to see what his mind can master in the course of his remaining lifetime, and who

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14. Hutner, *What America Read*, 205.

15. Kenneth W. Purdy, “Bright Young Man: Why Clifton ‘Kip’ Fadiman Is Radio Whiz of Quizzes,” *Radio Guide*, September 29, 1939, 8, accessed November 8, 2019, [https://americanradiohistory.com/Radio\\_Guide\\_Master\\_Page.htm#1939](https://americanradiohistory.com/Radio_Guide_Master_Page.htm#1939)

16. Katz, “An Afternoon with Clifton Fadiman,” 30.

17. Severo, “Clifton Fadiman,” B8.

18. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 17.

19. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 19.

has not met more than ten per cent, let us say, of the writers listed.”<sup>20</sup> Fadiman sees *The Lifetime Reading Plan* as one more means of popularizing, of bringing the great ideas to a wide audience. Fadiman uses his “Preliminary Talk With the Reader,” the introduction to his book, as an opportunity to respond to criticisms of popularizing work, writing, “one might suppose that such books would be of no overwhelming interest to the large “mass” audience served by *This Week*. But, despite what some communications tycoons believe, Americans respond more eagerly to the best than to the worst—provided the best is offered them.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Fadiman resists common critiques of the middlebrow while taking on the arguments that conservatives will later use to defend the traditional Western canon. If Fadiman, a Jewish man from an immigrant family who had been excluded from the academy, could find meaning in the Western canon, then so to could others, regardless of their race, class, or gender. He argues that average Americans not only *can* read and understand the great books but also *want* to read and understand them and are reaching out for the mediation that will enable them to do so.

Fadiman’s concept of a book list intended to last a lifetime pushes back against conceptions of the middlebrow as a quick fix or cheat. In the preface, Fadiman recognizes that his book might be lumped in with other products intended to make culture easily digestible and corrects this assumption. Of his *Plan*, he writes, “it is not magic. It does not automatically make you or me an “educated man.” It offers no solution to life’s ultimate mysteries. It will not make you “happy”—such claims are made by tooth pastes, motorcars, and deodorants, not by Plato, Dickens, and Hemingway.”<sup>22</sup> Neatly-packaged

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20. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 20.

21. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 17.

22. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 19.

middlebrow cultural products are often critiqued for precisely such claims of instant and practically effortless transformation. Fadiman rhetorically positions himself against the commercial middlebrow and establishes his *Lifetime Reading Plan* as a different kind of middlebrow product requiring mediated and purposeful reading, which takes time and effort on the reader's part.

Fadiman does promise transformation as a result of his *Plan*, but that transformation takes place over the course of an entire lifetime. When confronted with a list of one hundred books, some readers may be tempted to create a checklist of sorts, working their way through the list. Again, Fadiman asks them to resist this impulse, arguing, "this list is not something to be 'got through.' It is a mine of such richness of assay as to last a lifetime."<sup>23</sup> Rather than make the books on Fadiman's list into a temporary project, "they are intended to be an important part of a whole life."<sup>24</sup> Reading is just one part of readers' lives, but when that reading involves encountering the greatest ideas of human history on a regular basis, the result is a whole new lifestyle. Readers may not feel the immediate effects of any single text; the great books "act like a developing fluid on film. That is, they bring into consciousness what you didn't know you knew."<sup>25</sup> Slow changes in the self and in one's ideas over time, similar to "what is offered by loving and marrying, having and rearing children, carving out a career, creating a home"<sup>26</sup> is Fadiman's

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23. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 18.

24. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 18.

25. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 19.

26. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 18. Note that these life experiences could apply to both male and female readers, suggesting that Fadiman envisioned both as potential uses of his book list.

promoted purpose for middlebrow reading, and at this point he believes it can only be achieved through a long-term investment in reading the traditional Western canon.

### *The Lifetime Reading Plan List*

Throughout the framework for his recommended reading list, Fadiman engages in emerging conversations about canonicity and literary value while mediating from a position of authority. “This is not in any absolute sense a list of the ‘best books.’ There are no ‘best books,’” Fadiman writes in his 1960 “Preliminary Talk With the Reader.”<sup>27</sup> Instead, Fadiman’s list contains “original communications,” or “classics,” defined as texts which introduce new ideas or formal innovations.<sup>28</sup> Here, Fadiman critiques the concept of a “best books” list, suggesting that such a description is both imprecise and arbitrary: by what criteria might anyone develop a list of best books, and who is entitled to determine this criteria? In this way, Fadiman preempts later critiques of the literary canon and concepts of literary value by Lawrence W. Levine, Jane Tompkins, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Madhu Dubey, Henry Louis Gates, and others. Fadiman instead uses a more specific descriptor in order to make his mediation appear more objective. While there is no one way to determine the absolute best books in human history, originality can conceivably be identified. Indeed, Fadiman states that “there is fair agreement as to the original communications up to perhaps the year 1800” because temporal distance has allowed for a sense of clarity, again making his list appear more reliable.<sup>29</sup> By characterizing his mediation as objective, Fadiman assures readers that they will be using

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27. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 20.

28. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 20-21.

29. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21.

their reading time well by using his list to approach the most significant works of human history. At this point in history, before the canon debates have properly taken place, the “original communications” of women and writers of color go largely unrecognized, and the canon of the most significant works in human history continues to center on white, male writers.

Another way in which Fadiman establishes his own authority as a listmaker is through the use of cross-referencing throughout *The Lifetime Reading Plan*. In describing one author’s work, Fadiman will reference other authors whose work is related by parenthetically indicating the number of their entry in his *Plan*. Fadiman prepares readers for this strategy in the preface:

The idea of the parenthesized numbers, showing that these three men are discussed elsewhere, is not to make you turn at once, or indeed at all, to these references. The purpose is to stop you for a split second. It is to make you realize that the Western tradition is what Robert Hutchins called it, a Great Conversation in which hundreds of powerful or noble or delightful minds are talking with each other, reinforcing each other, refuting each other, recalling each other, or prophesying each other....They connect with each other, and finally they connect with us. Those little ( )s are there to point up this fact whenever (and only whenever) it is legitimate to do so.... great writers, consciously or unconsciously, are always making gestures toward their peers. Deep calls unto deep: Whitehead talks about Plato, not La Mettrie; Dante glances into the future toward T. S. Eliot, not Vachel Lindsay.<sup>30</sup>

This cross-referencing is designed to show readers how texts on Fadiman’s list are members of the Western canon and lends an academic quality to a list produced by a prominent middlebrow figure. By using this strategy, Fadiman prioritizes inclusion of those texts that easily relate to others considered canonical. As a result, texts that do not neatly fit within this framework are necessarily excluded. Fadiman’s mediation focuses exclusively on the “Great Conversation” of Western—and largely white and male—

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30. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 24-25.

thinking, thereby creating an argument that American readers in 1960 will be best served by exposure to this particular conversation rather than others. This strategy exposes the limitations of Fadiman's thinking about canonicity in 1960. While he does recognize the subjective nature of determining literary value, he does not yet heed the call to recognize the value of literary works outside of the Western tradition, particularly those by women and writers of color.

Despite his assurances of expert consensus and the academic tactic of cross-referencing, Fadiman must acknowledge that membership in the canon shifts over time. First, while there is some consensus regarding canonical texts prior to 1800, "there is diminishing agreement as we near our own era."<sup>31</sup> Without the distance of time to clarify which texts impacted larger thinking, it is difficult to determine which newer texts are worthy of being read. This issue plagues many other book listmakers, some of whom choose to omit literature of their own time entirely in order to avoid misjudgments. Fadiman's more surprising statement, though it appears as almost a side note, is that "the list of such books changes, though not radically, with each generation."<sup>32</sup> Rather than fall prey to the prevailing narrative of the literary canon—which would come into question as the twentieth century progressed—as objective and unchanging, Fadiman recognizes that each new generation will have different values and circumstances that will affect their relationship to literature and thus their understanding of the literary canon. As a result, Fadiman establishes his own mediation as immediate—his list will appeal to the purposeful reader in 1960 but may not fully apply to later generations. This is precisely

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31. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21.

32. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21.

why book list books are so valuable to an understanding of historical reading practices. They not only trace the shifting literary canon but are also framed by mediation that can help us understand why the canon shifts and how it relates to changing purposes for reading.

After conceding to the inevitable generational shifts in the canon, Fadiman then calls into question the possibility of objectivity in listmaking by writing, “No two scholars would compile identical lists, and no single scholar (I am not one) would find my own list satisfactory in all respects.”<sup>33</sup> Fadiman illustrates this point through nationality, saying that his list includes more works in English because of his native language, whereas a French listmaker would include more works in French.<sup>34</sup> What Fadiman does not yet fully express, or perhaps recognize, is that generation, nationality, and native tongue are not the only characteristics that can impact a listmaker’s work. Even listmakers with these characteristics in common—any “two scholars”—would produce different lists. Gesturing towards this subjectivity may make readers wonder whether this list, or really any single list, can be objective enough to direct a lifetime’s reading, especially with the purpose of encountering the greatest thinking that mankind has produced. Although the original *Lifetime Reading Plan* appears too early in the twentieth century for Fadiman to fully discuss the extent of his own subjectivity, it does illustrate some early tensions between creating an objective list suitable for a wide variety of readers to use over the course of a lifetime and recognizing that any such list must be to some extent subjective. It exists at a turning point for middlebrow mediation, in between

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33. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21.

34. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21.

the seemingly self-evident lists of Lubbock and Adler and the intentionally political lists following the culture wars.

### Seducing the Reader

Describing the entries within his *Lifetime Reading Plan*, Fadiman writes, “using from five hundred to a thousand words, I have tried to seduce you into reading the book I talk about.”<sup>35</sup> The word “seduce” resurfaces throughout the preface, providing an important indication of how Fadiman views his own mediation. One definition of “seduce” is “to lead (a person) astray in conduct or belief; to draw away *from* the right or intended course of action *to* or *into* a wrong one; to tempt, entice, or beguile *to do* something wrong, foolish, or unintended.”<sup>36</sup> In *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, Fadiman is not trying to convince readers to do something morally wrong. Instead, his seduction leads readers away from the mainstream impulse to read only a brief synopsis to familiarize themselves with a title and towards reading the original work. Fadiman’s aims are neither wrong nor foolish, but this language suggests that he views himself as leading readers astray from a diluted and inferior cultural path. When considered in conjunction with the first edition’s cover description of the *Plan* as “a stimulating and irresistible guide,” “seduction” also has a sexual connotation in which Fadiman’s descriptions lure readers away from the demands of their everyday lives and into intimate relationships with the great thinkers of human history. Viewed through a heteronormative lens, the use of “seduction” also suggests that Fadiman imagines his readers as female, which is at odds with other places

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35. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 25.

36. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, v. “seduce,” accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174721?redirectedFrom=seduce&>.



where he uses male pronouns to describe his audience but in line with a larger generalization of the middlebrow as feminized.

Fadiman uses a variety of content in order to seduce his reader, including literary criticism, textual summary, reading strategies, and, most often, author biography.<sup>37</sup> Many of the entries focus less on the significance of a specific text and more on interesting facts about the author's life. For example, the entry on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* is overtaken by a discussion of Rousseau's personality:

Of all the great writers we have met, Rousseau is the most irritating. His whole character offends any reasonable mind. Socially awkward; sexually ill-balanced; immoral; nauseatingly sentimental; mean and quarrelsome; a liar; manic-depressive; the victim of a large number of unpleasant ills, from persecution delusions to bladder trouble; a defender of the rights of little children who states calmly that he abandoned his five illegitimate offspring to a foundling institution: that is Rousseau, or part of him. It is simply exasperating that this absurd fellow, who died half-cracked, should also have been one of the most powerful forces of his time, the virtual ancestor of the Romantic movement in literature and art, and one of the major intellectual sources of the French Revolution. Even more annoying is the fact that this vagabond-valet-music teacher, whose formal education ended at about twelve, should be a writer of such persuasion that, though his arguments have been refuted by many, his rhetoric still bewitches. The whole Rousseau case is highly irregular...<sup>38</sup>

In order to draw readers into reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, Fadiman focuses on Rousseau the person, full of human complications and a multitude of off-putting traits. This entry and the others like it in *The Lifetime Reading Plan* demonstrate the interconnected purposes readers have for reading the great books. An initial purpose may be the lofty Arnoldian one of encountering the greatest thinking in the world. But underneath that desire to understand ideas is a more basic desire to connect with others, to understand who these great thinkers were and what about their lives could have led

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37. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 26.

38. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 218.

them to produce enduring masterpieces. This is much different from Adler's approach to reading, which requires readers to focus on the ideas conveyed through the text exclusively. Fadiman's mediation takes advantage of the desire to connect with authors as human beings first and draws upon a fascination with celebrity and the author as genius, thereby creating a more compelling argument for his middlebrow reader to read.

Fadiman repeatedly reminds his readers that reading *The Lifetime Reading Plan* alone is not enough: to reap the benefits of familiarity with these works, they must read the original texts themselves. He writes, "if you do no more than read [this book], you have wasted your time and money. While it is true that it contains a certain amount of information, many famous names, and hundreds of thumbnail judgments, its aim is not educational, but practical. That is, it is intended to spur you to action."<sup>39</sup> Although this assertion is relevant to all readers, it is especially important for those who recognize Fadiman from his radio programming and perhaps expect *The Lifetime Reading Plan* to be another way to quickly absorb factual information. Fadiman establishes himself as a different kind of middlebrow mediator in this context and expects that his readers will do the real work of reading the books he recommends. He warns readers that his *Plan* is not a reader's digest or other neatly-packaged middlebrow product but rather a "key to open doors."<sup>40</sup> The *Plan*, functioning as a key, provides the mediation readers need to understand which doors will unlock the most benefits for their own lives. From there, readers must do their own reading to actually unlock these doors. Once again, Fadiman,

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39. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 27.

40. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 25.

like other book listmakers, resists critiques of the middlebrow as a shortcut to cultural knowledge that results in only surface familiarity.

Although Fadiman does not provide explicit reading instruction like Adler's multi-step plan, he does include some guidelines for reading the types of books that he recommends. This type of reading should be active, requiring more attention than everyday reading like the news. To draw a familiar comparison, "a good book, like healthy exercise, can give you that pleasant sense of fatigue that comes of having stretched your mental muscles."<sup>41</sup> Simply reading *about* reading using Adler's method is exhausting because it asks readers to wring every bit of meaning from a text. This is by design, as Adler writes, "the most direct sign that you have done the work of reading is *fatigue*. Reading that is reading entails the most intense mental activity. If you are not tired out, you probably have not been doing the work."<sup>42</sup> In contrast, Fadiman takes a lighter approach, saying that reading these books shouldn't be strenuous to the point of exhaustion, but it should feel as though something has been accomplished. For Fadiman, middlebrow reading is something that one does for oneself alone, beginning an inward turn in the middlebrow purpose for reading that heightens as the twentieth century turns to the twenty-first. Furthermore, readers should return to these books over and over again throughout their lives:

Plato read at twenty-five is one man, Plato read at forty-five still another. It is not entirely frivolous to say that any great work of art is without question the cheapest thing one can ever buy. You pay for what seems a single object, a book or a picture or a phonograph record. But actually each such object is many objects; the works of Shakespeare do not consist of thirty-seven plays, but more nearly of 370

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41. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 28.

42. Adler, *How to Read a Book*, 110.

plays, for *Hamlet* changes into something else as you change into someone else with the passing of the years and the deepening of your sense of life.<sup>43</sup>

Fadiman recommends rereading texts because each reading brings a new perspective. In contrast to Adler, Fadiman says that “these books, however carefully read, are not to be *studied* as if they were school tasks. Do not try to exhaust their meaning. If you or I can get ten per cent of what Plato has to offer us, we will have done well enough.”<sup>44</sup> For those readers who desire more reading instruction, Fadiman does include Adler’s *How to Read a Book* on his original list, but Fadiman otherwise recommends a much more casual approach to reading, going in any order one desires and taking something from each text without concern for wringing out every drop of meaning. The result of this unhurried reading is a gradual transformation of the self accomplished not through individual texts but through the accumulation of reading and reflection on many texts over the course of a lifetime until the reader has changed without even realizing it. Purposeful middlebrow reading is far from a shortcut: it can be a lifetime commitment.

### Reading Strategies

Although Fadiman does not provide the explicit reading instruction that Adler does, his mediation in *The Lifetime Reading Plan* helps readers determine the appropriate mood or mindset with which to approach individual texts. Whereas Adler recommends a single method for all of the books on his list, Fadiman introduces the idea that each text is best read in its own way:

Remember that part of the pleasure you get from this kind of reading depends on the attitude with which you approach it. Herodotus can be enjoyed in an informal mood; Thucydides gains if you gird your mental loins in advance. Furthermore, these works cannot all be read at the same tempo. Just as you slow down at

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43. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 27-28.

44. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 28.

curves, so you are forced to slow down at Aristotle or Dewey. You can handle *Candide* in a single evening of delight; but you may find it worth while to spend an equal amount of time over a single short poem such as Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." In any case there's no hurry; you have a lifetime.<sup>45</sup>

Reading these challenging texts comes down to the mindsets with which readers approach them. This is important because anyone can adjust their attitude and expectations, meaning that these texts are much more accessible than their reputations might lead one to believe. Fadiman's tone is gentle—readers can certainly read these texts in other ways, but they may miss out on their full benefit. The choice is theirs. Here, mindset can be correlated with a middlebrow mode of reading, which can be engaged or disengaged by the same reader when reading different texts. By incorporating ideal mindsets for each text into his mediation, Fadiman illustrates that there is not just one rigidly prescribed way to read in the middlebrow mode like Adler argues but rather many ways in which readers can engage a purposeful and mediated middlebrow mode of reading. This is one way in which the middlebrow expands as it evolves, encompassing new reading practices with time. Fadiman returns to this issue of mindset throughout the entries for his recommendations, providing the mediation readers need to achieve their purposes for reading individual texts.

In some entries, Fadiman's mediation regarding reading strategy focuses on the speed with which one reads. This speed relates to the attention one will give the details of the text, impacting what the reader will comprehend and remember. A text like the *Histories* of Herodotus, for example, "should be read, at least at first, in great long gulps, almost carelessly....The absorption of specific facts is less important than the immersion

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45. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 28-29.

of yourself in the broad, full, buoyant Herodotean river of narrative.”<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, when it comes to the poetry of Robert Frost, readers should “absorb him slowly, over a long period.”<sup>47</sup> While Adler argues that all great books reward slow, methodical reading, Fadiman demonstrates that this is true for some texts, but others reward quick surface reading. In both entries, readers are encouraged to read the texts because they will take pleasure in them—the pleasure of Herodotus’ narrative and persona, and the pleasure of Frost’s beautiful and complex poetic mind. While Adler encouraged readers to only read the best works, things have changed by the time Fadiman writes his book list book. At this point midcentury, the middlebrow mode is employed even when pleasure reading, providing mediation as to which texts will provide the most pleasure and which reading strategies will help readers take greater pleasure in the recommended texts. Readers engaged in the middlebrow mode want more than cultural capital, and they also want more than empty pleasure: they want the most pleasure and the best pleasure, and for that they need mediation.

In a few key entries, Fadiman strays far afield from other listmakers by recommending that readers skip parts of texts or even read abridged versions. Fadiman begins the Cervantes entry by stating that “*Don Quixote* is perhaps the only book (but see Tolstoy, 52) on our long list that may profitably be read in an abridged (but, please, not a bowdlerized or children’s) version.”<sup>48</sup> If readers instead use a full translation of the novel, Fadiman recommends that they “do some skipping. Whenever (or almost

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46. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 39.

47. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 228.

48. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 132.

whenever) you come to a goatherd or a shepherdess, some drivel lies ahead. Skip all the interpolated pastoral yarns that pleased Cervantes' audience but bore us stiff. Skip every bit of verse you meet; Cervantes is one of the world's worst poets."<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere in the entry, Fadiman insists that *Don Quixote* is one of the most widely studied books in the world, yet here he encourages readers to skip substantial portions of it. Virginia Woolf and Dwight Macdonald would say that this is everything that's wrong with the middlebrow: readers take what they want in order to perform familiarity with great works and increase their social standing. I maintain that Fadiman's suggestion is more nuanced than this and relates to helping readers make the best use of their time. With so many great books to experience and so many other demands on readers' time, it is difficult to recommend that readers read every word of a long novel like Cervantes' if they don't necessarily need to. It would likewise be irresponsible to leave such an important work off of a lifetime reading list. While Adler would certainly expect readers to take in every word (and he does include the novel on his list), Fadiman compromises by encouraging readers to read the passages that epitomize *Don Quixote* and skip over the less relevant or skillful ones. In doing so, he provides the mediation that will help readers gain the most from these canonical texts in the reading time that they have.

Fadiman also provides additional encouragement for readers who may have concerns about their comprehension abilities. In the entry on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Fadiman forewarns his readers, "do not expect to understand everything—eminent scholars are still quarreling over Dante's meanings. You will understand enough to make your reading

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49. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 132.

worth the effort.<sup>50</sup>” This reassurance appears over and over again in *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, both in the preface and in the individual entries. While readers are encouraged to take on some challenging texts, and Adler would expect them to reread until they fully understood the authors’ meanings, Fadiman repeatedly tells them that they will not understand everything that they read and that that is perfectly fine. In this part of his mediation, Fadiman helps his readers set reasonable expectations for their reading, which will likely prevent or alleviate discouragement when they encounter difficult texts. Fadiman also indicates that purposeful reading does not have to mean understanding every single word of every single text. Readers will be able to take something away from what they read, to achieve their purposes in reading, even when they read imperfectly. With a little bit of guidance, engagement with the great books on any level will still benefit readers in their ongoing self-transformation.

In his entry on James Joyce, Fadiman employs all of his mediation strategies, providing more guidance for reading *Ulysses* than any other book on his list. First, Fadiman must convince his readers that this novel is for them. Whereas other entries can provide some biographical information about the author in order to seduce readers into reading the recommended text, *Ulysses* has a more complex reputation that must be addressed. Before entering into reading strategies for this novel, Fadiman makes several points about the significance of *Ulysses* “to remove from our minds any notion that this book is a huge joke, or a huge obscenity, or the work of a demented genius, or the altar of a cult.”<sup>51</sup> Readers will have heard of or even read many of the other texts in *The Lifetime*

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50. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 148.

51. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 106.



*Reading Plan* at school, shaping the way they think about them. *Ulysses*, however, was new and scandalous enough that readers may have formed opinions of it outside of the classroom without reading the novel for themselves. Fadiman asks readers to set aside what they may have heard about *Ulysses* and instead keep in mind that the novel is a completely original and influential work that rewards careful study. Many book list books avoid modernist texts entirely because they are both newer and challenging. Adler's list in *How to Read a Book* was not one of these lists: Adler recommends *Ulysses*, which was a possibility only because of the shifts in perception about the audience for the novel between its original serialization in 1918-1920 and the publication of Adler's list in 1940.<sup>52</sup> Fadiman recognizes that *Ulysses*' reputation may make middlebrow readers hesitate but says that reading it anyway will give them the personal satisfaction of appreciating a newer kind of great literature.

Unlike his strategies for other texts, Fadiman recommends that readers undergo extensive preparatory work in order to read *Ulysses*. First, readers should read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to familiarize themselves with the character of Stephen Dedalus and Joyce's Dublin. Then, they should read a commentary on the novel. After doing this reading, they can go into the novel itself, though they should still be prepared for a challenge.<sup>53</sup> Although the preparation that Fadiman advises may feel much more like Adler's studying than the pleasure reading that Fadiman otherwise recommends—though of course Adler would advise readers to avoid supplementary reading and tackle

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52. Catherine Turner, "How to Enjoy James Joyce's Great Novel *Ulysses*," in *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars*, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 173-213.

53. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 107.

the novel head-on—it actually puts Fadiman’s reader on level ground with Joyce’s ideal reader, who would have read his previous work and had background knowledge to help them understand *Ulysses*’ many allusions. By providing readers with avenues to gain that background knowledge, Fadiman brings them into the fold of readers equipped to understand Joyce’s novel, preventing them from throwing their hands up in confusion after only a few pages. This approach of providing a framework for reading had been highly successful when initially advertising the novel to an American audience, turning it from an incomprehensible novel for only readers with the highest of brows to a bestseller,<sup>54</sup> and Fadiman draws upon this same strategy when recommending it in his *Plan*.

Because readers may still experience confusion when reading *Ulysses* even after undergoing the recommended background reading, Fadiman also lists several of Joyce’s purposes for readers to watch for as they read:

1. To trace, as completely as possible, the thoughts and doings of a number of Dubliners during the day and evening of June 16, 1904.
2. To trace, virtually completely, the thoughts and doings of two of them: Stephen Dedalus, the now classic type of the modern intellectual, and his spiritual father, the more or less average man, Leopold Bloom.
3. To give his book a form paralleling (not always obviously) the events and characters of the *Odyssey* of Homer (2). Thus Stephen is Telemachus, Bloom Odysseus (Ulysses), Molly an unfaithful Penelope, Bella Cohen Circe.
4. To invent or develop whatever new techniques are needed for his monumental task. These include, among dozens, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, parody, dream and nightmare sequences, puns, word coinages, unconventional punctuation or none at all, and so forth. Ordinary novelists try to satisfy us with a selection from or summary of their characters’ thoughts. Joyce gives you the thoughts themselves, in all their streamy, dreamy, formless flow.<sup>55</sup>

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54. Turner, “How to Enjoy James Joyce’s Great Novel *Ulysses*.”

55. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 107-8.

These points are much more specific than what is provided in the entries for Fadiman's other recommendations and point to a purpose for reading related to understanding formal innovation, which is more in line with highbrow reading practices though it still requires the extensive mediation of the middlebrow mode. Fadiman's focus throughout *The Lifetime Reading Plan* is to help readers gain a better understanding of humanity, and this entry is no exception. By reading Joyce through the lens of his formal innovations, readers are "granted a view of human life of incomparable richness,"<sup>56</sup> and they need not understand every detail to see this richness. Through his extensive mediation in this entry, Fadiman argues that his readers are capable of reading a novel like *Ulysses* and that they will benefit from reading it. Whereas an earlier *Ulysses* book recommendation would have had to do with the buzz surrounding the novel, including its obscenity and censorship, Fadiman's 1960 recommendation indicates an inward turn in the middlebrow purpose for reading where a novel like *Ulysses* is beneficial for the middlebrow reader because it can provide the satisfaction of tackling something challenging.

Engaging in a middlebrow mode of reading means that even highbrow modernist texts like *Ulysses* are possible for the average reader provided they have adequate mediation. If readers can and should read *Ulysses*, then nothing is closed off to them—provided they have sufficient mediation. As Catherine Turner notes, although the advertising for Random House's American edition of *Ulysses* persuades average folks that they are capable of reading the novel, as does Fadiman's recommendation, it does not suggest that they can do so on their own. Rather, middlebrow readers may come to rely upon the expert guidance that they use to tackle challenging works like *Ulysses*

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56. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 106.

rather than becoming independent readers.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Fadiman's *Lifetime Reading Plan*, serves as an argument for the importance, possibility, and benefits of middlebrow readers reading the Western literary canon with the aid of cultural arbiters, in many ways anticipating the arguments of conservative culture warriors in the years to come.

### **The Canon Debates**

A key event in the culture wars, the broader conflict over American culture that included questions regarding literary canonicity, came to be known as the Stanford Debate. Stanford University had required all undergraduates to take a course in Western culture during their freshman year. The course encompassed fifteen required works, from ancient texts to Darwin and Freud, and strongly recommended works from several additional categories.<sup>58</sup> In 1986, the Black Student Union filed a formal complaint regarding the course, criticizing it for its lack of representation and claiming that it did not serve the needs of Stanford's Black students. Other student groups, including those representing Latinx students and feminists, followed with similar complaints.<sup>59</sup> After two years, the debate regarding the Western Civilization course and its reading list had attracted significant attention in the popular media, both nationally and internationally, and similar debates were happening on many other college campuses. In 1988, Stanford's

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57. Turner, "'How to Enjoy James Joyce's Great Novel *Ulysses*,'" 212-13.

58. Herbert Lindenberger, "On the Sacrality of Reading Lists: The Western Culture Debate at Stanford University," in *The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 148-49. The list was as follows: *Hebrew Bible*, Genesis; Homer, major selections from *Iliad* or *Odyssey* or both; at least one Greek tragedy; Plato, *Republic*, major portions of Books I-VII; *New Testament*, selections including a gospel; Augustine, *Confessions*, I-IX; Dante, *Inferno*; More, *Utopia*; Machiavelli, *The Prince*; Luther, *Christian Liberty*; Galileo, *The Starry Messenger* and *The Assayer*; Voltaire, *Candide*; Max and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; Darwin, selections; Freud, *Outline of Psychoanalysis* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

59. Lindenberger, "On the Sacrality of Reading Lists," 150-51.

Academic Senate responded to these complaints by instating a course called Culture, Ideas, Values—C.I.V.—that replaced Western Civilization’s static reading list with a new list that would be selected by those teaching the course each year.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps at another time the issue of the syllabus for a single course at an elite university would be of little interest to those outside of the ivory tower. However, the Stanford Debate took place at a tipping point for the cultural representation of women and marginalized groups in America. During this time, the issue of which books Americans should read, particularly in the classroom, was politicized like never before.

In the late 1980s, several widely circulated books and documents promoted the conservative viewpoint of preserving the traditional Western literary canon, by which they meant texts written almost exclusively by white European men. As Lawrence W. Levine reminds us,

The "traditional" curriculum that prevailed so widely in the decades between the World Wars, and whose decline is lamented with such fervor by the conservative critics, ignored most of the groups that compose the American population whether they were from Africa, Europe, Asia, Central and South America, or from indigenous North American peoples. The primary and often exclusive focus was upon a narrow stratum of those who came from a few Northern and Western European countries whose cultures and mores supposedly became the archetype for those of all Americans in spite of the fact that in reality American culture was forged out of a much larger and more diverse complex of peoples and societies. In addition, this curriculum did not merely teach Western ideas and culture, it taught the *superiority* of Western ideas and culture; it equated Western ways and thought with "Civilization" itself.<sup>61</sup>

This is the canon that was so urgently defended by conservatives in the late twentieth century. In his 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has*

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60. Lindenberger, "On the Sacrality of Reading Lists," 156-57.

61. Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1997), 20.

*Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Allan Bloom argued that American students must begin by understanding Western thinking before they could then question those traditional beliefs and continue developing new knowledge.<sup>62</sup> If they didn't have a traditional education, Bloom feared that students would search for themselves in "trash" and "propaganda," leading them to focus only on the immediacy of the present rather than looking back to the past and forward to the future.<sup>63</sup> Bloom was supported by William J. Bennett's 1984 National Endowment for the Humanities project under the Reagan administration, "To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education." Although Bennett conceded that educated Americans should be familiar with other cultures, he insisted that "the core of the American college curriculum—its heart and soul—should be the civilization of the West, source of the most powerful and pervasive influences on America and all of its people."<sup>64</sup> In his bestselling *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, E.D. Hirsch saw American schools as responsible for leveling the playing field so that students from disadvantaged homes were able to escape the poverty and illiteracy of their parents, and he called upon teachers to teach a cohesive curriculum based on Western culture in order to accomplish this.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Christopher Clausen, writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

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62. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 25-43.

63. Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, 64. These are clearly racist and sexist terms for texts that Bloom wanted to denigrate as less valuable than those in the Western tradition.

64. William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), 30, accessed September 21, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015009288278&view=1up&seq=5>.

65. E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), xiii. Note that, while Hirsch does include a list at the end of his book, it is not a book list book because the list includes concepts, historical figures, etc. in addition to texts.

responded to claims that teaching Western culture is elitist by asserting that “what is really elitist is the assumption that a stew of popular culture, social indoctrination, and a selection of recent American writing provides sufficient intellectual nourishment for students who lack the advantages of an upper-middle-class childhood.”<sup>66</sup> In another culture wars bestseller, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, Dinesh D’Souza claimed that multicultural works on syllabi were chosen to align politically with the faculty’s Western views, thereby misrepresenting other cultures and skewing students’ understanding. As a result, “students are not only deprived of full exposure to the Western tradition, but they do not even get a genuine and comprehensive understanding of non-Western cultures....it distorts other cultures and peoples and makes future global understanding more difficult.”<sup>67</sup> For all of these conservative writers, the prospect of opening the canon presented very real dangers to individual students and American culture at large.

Those in favor of opening the canon to women writers, Black writers, and others typically excluded from the Western canon largely focused their efforts on college campuses.<sup>68</sup> For example, feminist critics such as Nina Baym in *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* critiqued the traditional canon and its associated methods of literary criticism for privileging the male:

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66. Christopher Clausen, “It Is Not Elitist to Place Major Literature at the Center of the English Curriculum,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 34, no. 18 (January 13, 1988): A52, accessed September 4, 2019, Education Database. While he presents his viewpoint as leveling the playing field, Clausen’s argument actually represents an assimilationist approach to education.

67. Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 92.

68. Ian Butcher, “Reading the Culture Wars in the New Academic Novel, 1984-Present” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2017), 18-19, accessed January 27, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

I cannot avoid the belief that "purely" literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male—in favor, say, of whaling ships rather than the sewing circle as a symbol of the human community; in favor of satires on domineering mothers, shrewish wives, or betraying mistresses rather than tyrannical fathers, abusive husbands, or philandering suitors; displaying an exquisite compassion for the crises of the adolescent male, but altogether impatient with the parallel crises of the female. While not claiming literary greatness for any of the novels introduced in this study, I would like at least to begin to correct such a bias by taking their content seriously. And it is time, perhaps—though this task lies outside my scope here—to reexamine the grounds upon which certain hallowed American classics have been called great.<sup>69</sup>

Advocates for including Black writers in the literary canon made similar calls to adjust the way that literary criticism functions. Both Barbara Christian and Henry Louis Gates argued that the canon functions as an argument for white supremacy, claiming that it is America's "universal" "common culture" when in fact America is much more complex and diverse.<sup>70</sup> Madhu Dubey found that even though black women's novels were being read and taught more widely, they were not formally analyzed in the same way as canonical works, and she called for the academy to take these texts seriously.<sup>71</sup> Gates neatly summarized what was at stake in the culture wars in these central questions: "What does it mean to be an American? Must academic inquiry be subordinated to the requirements of national identity? Should scholarship and education reflect our actual diversity, or should they, rather, forge a communal identity that may not yet have been

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69. Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 14-15.

70. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (1987): 54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>; Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 175-76.

71. Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 9-10.



achieved?"<sup>72</sup> Despite all of the right's arguments for preserving the Western tradition in education, in 2007 Rachel Donadio was able to report with confidence, "today it's generally agreed that the multiculturalists won the canon wars."<sup>73</sup> In the late twentieth century, classroom syllabi and literature anthologies increasingly reflected the diversity of the United States and the world. In part, this victory had to do with conservatives mistaking or misrepresenting the ways in which literary institutions had functioned in the past. The literary canon was not and had never been a perfectly preserved and delineated sacred ground.

Indeed, the canon lacked much of the power that was attributed to it. Clausen, who argued in favor of maintaining the Western tradition, points out that what we call the canon is not nearly so organized as its name implies. Rather than being a single list recognized by literary stakeholders, the canon is better understood as works located on unrelated syllabi for courses taught on different types of campuses by faculty functioning largely independently.<sup>74</sup> Gerald Graff furthers this point by noting that the canon is largely a feature of the educational system and doesn't reflect what is read outside of the classroom or how canonized works are read by average readers.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, Lawrence W. Levine corrects the assumption that the Western canon under attack at the end of the

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72. Gates, *Loose Canons*, xiv.

73. Rachel Donadio, "Revisiting the Canon Wars," *The New York Times Book Review*, September 16, 2007, 16(L), accessed November 25, 2019, Literature Resource Center. Donadio does not explain who exactly she considers "the multiculturalists" to be, but she goes on to discuss the inclusion of "women and minority writers" on reading lists. Henry Louis Gates reports that the term "multiculturalism" was often used by the popular media to loosely describe all those who want to open the canon. He traces the origins of the "multicultural" movement to the inception of "Afro-American Studies" in the late 1960s. Gates, *Loose Canons*, xi-xii.

74. Clausen, "It Is Not Elitist," A52.

75. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Twentieth anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13.

twentieth century was traditional at all. As I discussed in the previous chapter, great books and Western Civilization courses in fact emerged after World War I as a response to an increasingly complex world.<sup>76</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, American students would have studied few works in English at all, instead focusing on the Greek and Latin classics.<sup>77</sup> To claim as the conservatives did that the Western canon must continue to be taught because it had always been taught, then, was to forget that the Western canon itself was quite new and recently controversial itself.

The literary canon is supposed to represent the most valuable texts in literary history, but the criteria for what makes a text valuable are constantly changing. As Levine writes in *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*, “the only truly permanent element in the classical American canon was the belief in its timelessness.”<sup>78</sup> Much of the scholarship on the literary canon focuses on the fact that its contents tend to change at the same time as it promotes its own endurance. In her study of anthologies, Jane Tompkins finds that anthologists base their selections upon the idea of “literary excellence” but that the meaning of this term changes over time.<sup>79</sup> Those texts that endure do so because they manage to continue meeting conceptions of literary excellence that are constantly changing.<sup>80</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith thus characterizes literary value as “contingent” because it is “a changing function of multiple variables.”<sup>81</sup> Of course, for

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76. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, 64-65.

77. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, 85.

78. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, 78.

79. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 192.

80. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 34-35.

81. Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 11.

those in favor of opening the canon, one of those variables was the importance of representation and ensuring that the literary canon included the voices of women and writers of color. The opening of the literary canon in the second half of the twentieth century, though it constituted a significant revision, was also one more evolution of a constantly changing rather than static understanding of literary value.

Additionally, while defenders of the traditional canon characterized its opening as a complete overhaul, the changes that took place in the late twentieth century were in fact much more incremental. In analyzing a range of syllabi to determine whether Shakespeare was being replaced by Alice Walker, as Clausen had once suggested, Gerald Graff found that Shakespeare continued to figure prominently on the college syllabus.<sup>82</sup> It was the limitations of the course reading list that led many to fear that opening the canon meant replacing works that seemed irreplaceable. In practice, revision of the canon to include previously unrepresented groups most often meant expansion. Additional works joined the canon, and new programs of study were developed.<sup>83</sup> The result of this slow change by means of addition, Stanley Fish observed, was “canons—not one but many.”<sup>84</sup> The multiculturalists had indeed won the culture wars, but they had done so one syllabus at a time, slowly exposing students to new works that would speak to them in a new era of American history.

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82. Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 16-25.

83. Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 3. This means of expansion is due in part to the field coverage model of the literature department, where faculty are responsible to “cover” a certain literary period or genre. When the canon opens, new faculty are brought in and new programs are developed. Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 6-7.

84. Stanley Fish, “Canon Busting: The Basic Issues,” *National Forum* 69, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 14.

As Herbert Lindenberger observes, “attempts to modify or replace canons are always in some sense political, though what we label ‘political’ can itself not easily be separated from what we call ‘cultural.’”<sup>85</sup> What Lindenberger does not say is that preserving an existing canon, whether passively or through vehement defense, is *also* political. Gates articulates exactly why this is so dangerous:

the teaching of literature *is* the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes; it is—it has become—the teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women or people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonances of their cultural voices. The return of “the” canon, the high canon of Western masterpieces, represents the return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable. Who would return us to that medieval never-never land?<sup>86</sup>

The choices that we make about what to teach and what to read are always choices; they are not self-evident. In this period, when the literary canon was also politicized as never before or since, the importance of the literary canon’s composition became clear. Choices about inclusion and exclusion needed to be made intentionally, and those making those choices needed to be prepared to defend them.

These choices regarding canonicity were being made not only for college syllabi, but also for products aimed at middlebrow readers. During this period, the middlebrow did not align with one side or the other—with opening or closing the canon—but was instead leveraged on both sides of the debate. Logically, conservative thinkers would seem to align with an anti-middlebrow position because they believed that Americans should directly engage with the great thinkers of the traditional Western canon, and the middlebrow has frequently been criticized for its repackaging of canonical texts.

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85. Lindenberger, “On the Sacrality of Reading Lists,” 161.

86. Gates, *Loose Canons*, 35.

However, they presented their arguments through bestselling trade publications and media outlets with a wide reach. Like Adler, they suggested that a broad audience was capable of reading the original great books, but they politicized these great books to preserve an exclusionary vision of American culture that privileged a white, male perspective. Those in favor of opening the canon also targeted middlebrow readers by recognizing that many of those middlebrow readers were women and were not white, and they brought new texts by women and writers of color into the canon that enabled those readers to see themselves represented there. Furthermore, many of the new additions to the canon invite a purposeful middlebrow mode of reading in which readers could not only encounter new perspectives which may or may not be similar to their own but also apply elements of what they read to their own lives.

Book list books published during this period embody these two sides of the canon debates. Some book list books preserve the traditional Western canon in order to promote purposeful reading focused on a narrow view of literary excellence. Other book listmakers mediate the opening of the literary canon and encourage middlebrow readers to purposefully read a wide variety of texts in order to better understand both diverse perspectives and themselves. Clifton Fadiman and John S. Major's *New Lifetime Reading Plan* provides a unique opportunity to see how one listmaker navigated the canon debates, opening the book list in this new edition to include more diversity in its authors.

### ***The New Lifetime Reading Plan***

In 1997, even though he was no longer the well-known middlebrow figure he had been earlier in the twentieth century, Fadiman released a new edition of his book list book that was so changed as to warrant the title *The New Lifetime Reading Plan: The*

*Classic Guide to World Literature, Revised and Expanded*. In the original *Lifetime Reading Plan*, Fadiman had justified his exclusion of Eastern classics for three reasons: because he writes for a Western audience, because he himself lacked an understanding of these literary traditions, and because he hadn't enjoyed the Eastern texts that he had read.<sup>87</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, these reasons were insufficient. Fadiman took on a coauthor, John S. Major, and expanded his *Plan* to cover world literature. Major's preface to the new edition attributes the expansion to changing times:

As recently as a decade ago it was reasonable to construct a program of guided reading that included only works in the Western tradition, while acknowledging that a time might come when a shrinking world, and improvements in various communications media, would make familiarity with all of the world's literary traditions a requirement for the well-educated and well-read person. [PAGE BREAK] That time has come sooner than one might have expected. For an American in the last decade of the twentieth century, the "global village" is a reality, the world having been shrunk by jet aircraft, by communications satellites, by instantaneous television news from everywhere, and by the Internet, to the extent that, in a sense, nothing is foreign to anyone's experience. Moreover, the United States, from its origins a nation of immigrants, has been enriched anew in recent years by fresh arrivals from all over the world, one consequence of this being that as a people, our cultural roots have become more diverse than ever before. Because our country is now more profoundly multicultural than ever, and also because it is to everyone's personal advantage to cast as wide a net as possible in harvesting the world's cultural riches, the works suggested in *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* now include Lady Murasaki along with Miss Austen, Tanizaki cheek-by-jowl with Faulkner, Ssu-ma Ch'ien as well as Thucydides. We think that these additions to the Plan will enhance both your pleasure and your sense of achievement as a reader.<sup>88</sup>

The time has come, Major argues, for educated people to be familiar with literatures beyond the Western tradition. The multiculturalists have indeed won the culture wars, and the changes between the original *Lifetime Reading Plan* and the *New Lifetime*

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87. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 21-22.

88. Clifton Fadiman and John S. Major, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan: The Classic Guide to World Literature, Revised and Expanded* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), xiii-xiv.

*Reading Plan* mirror the opening of the canon that occurred in higher education as a result, bringing these new parameters for literary value to a broader audience of middlebrow readers.

That these changes were made largely through the use of a coauthor is in line with the field coverage approach to staffing college English departments in the late twentieth century. When departments needed to expand their offerings but didn't have faculty with the necessary expertise to do so, they often hired new, specialized faculty to cover these new offerings.<sup>89</sup> As Fadiman indicated in the original *Lifetime Reading Plan*, he lacked interest and expertise in literatures outside of the Western tradition. When it became necessary to expand the *Plan* to include these literatures, the best way to do so was to bring in a coauthor who already had this expertise and interest.<sup>90</sup> John S. Major holds a PhD in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University. He has taught and published in East Asian history and was a Senior Editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club from 1988-2001.<sup>91</sup> He was an excellent choice for this project because his experience crossed both cultural and “brow” lines. Explaining their collaboration in the preface, Major writes, “Mr. Fadiman and I are very closely in accord in our literary opinions and judgments; we would hardly have undertaken this joint project otherwise.”<sup>92</sup> However, the individual contributions of each author are clear. Fadiman wrote entries for only the newly included Western texts, whereas Major wrote all of the entries for newly included

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89. Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 6-7.

90. By this point in time, Fadiman had also grown blind and relied upon others to read aloud to him. This phase in his life is described in Fadiman, *The Wine Lover's Daughter*.

91. John S. Major, “Bio,” John S. Major: Scholarship and Writings, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://johnmajorchina.com/bio/>

92. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, xvii.

non-Western texts. Each entry is signed with either Fadiman's or Major's initials so that there is no mistaking its author. The resulting text is not a cohesive collaboration but rather a middlebrow expression of the field coverage model in book list book form, with each author staking claim to his work.

Much like Graff found had happened with college syllabi, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* also opens the canon by way of addition rather than substitution. While some writers that hadn't held up and some synthesis works from the 1960 edition, amounting to seventeen recommendations, were omitted from the revised list, forty-nine works were added, including over twenty non-Western writers, some contemporary Western writers, and some works of science.<sup>93</sup> Because Major specializes in East Asian history, many of the newly added texts are foundational philosophical texts by Asian authors. There are only a few Latin American texts and one African novel. Although these new recommendations may not have been selected for political purposes, as conservative cultural critics might suggest, they do reflect the scholarly interests of the new coauthor. As a result, the mediation to expand the literary canon by including world literature is not comprehensive but is instead limited by the backgrounds of the individual mediators.

Because some cultures are represented by only a single text in *The New Lifetime Reading Plan*, the entries for those few works by writers of color that are included fall prey to literary tokenism. See, for example, Major's entry for Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, one of the new inclusions in 1997:

Just as the inclusion of Garcia Marquez [132] in earlier editions of the Lifetime Reading Plan acknowledged the growing importance of Latin American writers in modern world literature, so also it is fitting that the final work in the New

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93. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, xiv-xv.



Lifetime Reading Plan be the masterpiece of Chinua Achebe, in recognition not only that *Things Fall Apart* has already entered the worldwide modern canon, but that henceforth African literature will claim its due as part of the literary heritage of readers everywhere. Achebe in this sense also stands here as a surrogate for Senghor, Soyinka (for both of whom see *Going Further*, below), Diop, and many other African writers whose works transcend merely regional significance.<sup>94</sup>

While the Western texts on the list are cross-referenced to indicate their relationship to one another, they largely stand on their own rather than representing entire civilizations. Achebe's novel, however, must stand in and break ground for an entire continent's presence in the world literary canon. When readers read a Western text, they read a single, though significant, text. When they read non-Western texts, this mediation indicates, they absorb entire cultures. This is far too much to ask of any single novel, and it puts readers at risk of generalizing about the very cultures they seek to understand. In this way, middlebrow readers are encouraged to expand their reading beyond the Western tradition, leading them to believe that they are culturally aware, but they have only limited perspectives on cultures that are not their own because even recommended lists developed from a progressive perspective devote only a few token entries to these traditions.

Because Fadiman and Major's intended audience of American readers is perceived to lack experience with non-Western texts, the level of mediation for the non-Western entries in *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* differs from that in the Western entries. Fadiman can assume that average American readers have at least heard of most of the texts and authors he recommends. Major can make no such assumptions about his recommendations. His mediation cannot assume that readers have any familiarity or background information about the texts he adds to the list. For example, Major spends

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94. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 298.

approximately one third of the entry on R. K. Narayan explaining to readers how the English language functions in India so that they can understand the appearance of an Indian novel in English, but not in translation, on the list.<sup>95</sup> A discussion of the recommended novels is subsumed by a discussion of global Englishes. Major's mediation assumes a mainstream white American audience that would be unfamiliar with cultures outside of their own and meets these readers where he perceives they are. When a middlebrow book list book expands the literary canon while at the same time assuming an audience of only white readers, it has only done part of the work of representation. Immigrant readers and readers of color may see their cultures represented on the reading list, but when they are not addressed as part of the audience of the book list book, they are not truly included.

In the 1960 edition of *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, Fadiman introduces his goal for the entries, writing, "always I have tried to point out, not always directly, what we mid-twentieth-century Americans may gain from a given book."<sup>96</sup> In his additions to the new 1997 *Plan*, Major much more explicitly addresses why modern Americans should read these texts. When explaining why readers should be interested in the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, Major not only summarizes the significance of his ideas but also connects him to American history. Even though Mencius was alive around 400-320 B.C.E., Major claims him as "a distant ancestor of our own Revolution," tracing the ideas in the Declaration of Independence back to Mencius.<sup>97</sup> Here, Major draws upon the

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95. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 278-79.

96. Fadiman, *Lifetime Reading Plan*, 26.

97. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 31.

often-used listmaker strategy of connecting recommendations to being a good American, but he expands the recommended texts beyond the country's founding documents. This tactic can be read as both global and Ameri-centric. By extending the reach of American history back to an ancient Chinese philosopher, Major calls into question the white history of the country, recognizing that other cultures and ethnicities have deeply influenced America as well. However, by centering a text written so long before the founding of the United States on the American Revolution, Major also erases the Chinese context of the original work, encouraging American readers to think about it only in the context of their country.

Major also recommends *The Koran* for political reasons, including an anecdote about how little American political leaders know about Islam. He then reasons, "at a time when one of every five people in the world is a Muslim, and the Islamic world contributes a disproportionate share of our government's foreign policy concerns, it seems to me a matter of simple good citizenship to know something about Islam."<sup>98</sup> This mediation further reveals Major's intended audience. Major argues for reading *The Koran* by pointing out that one fifth of the world's population is Muslim. However, by recommending this text as a means to better understand Muslim people, he assumes that his readers are not part of that one fifth, further situating Muslims as others. Major's mediation for non-Western texts provides a frame of reference for a white American audience to approach texts that seem completely foreign to them, unfortunately risking alienating the diverse America he celebrates in the preface along the way. Unfortunately, this was a common move for middlebrow cultural works. As Christina Klein notes,

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98. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 55.

middlebrow texts about Asia “were not interested in Asia per se, but in America and its relationship to Asia.”<sup>99</sup> In the book list book context, non-Western texts, rather than being valuable cultural works in their own right, are mediated for the middlebrow reader only in terms of their relevance and use value for a mainstream white American audience.

One of Fadiman’s significant revisions to *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* is the inclusion of additional women writers. In his entry for *Jane Eyre*, Fadiman explains why the novel appears on his list for the first time in 1997:

A lady once asked Samuel Johnson [59] why in his Dictionary he had defined “pastern” as the “knee” of a horse. “Ignorance, madame, pure ignorance,” he replied. Why, in earlier editions of this book, did I omit *Jane Eyre*? Carelessness, dear reader, pure carelessness. From my teenage reading I remembered *Jane Eyre* as an interesting but old-fashioned romantic novel slanted to female interests. And so, until recently, I did not bother to reread it and so correct a narrow-minded youthful judgment.<sup>100</sup>

In his preface, Major explains the new *Plan*’s world literature expansion as reflecting a changing world. However, when it comes to women’s literature, Fadiman characterizes his previous omission as an oversight, erasing the important work done by feminists in the twentieth century to recognize the value of literature that was previously seen as “only” written by and for women. Fadiman blames himself for not including *Jane Eyre* earlier without recognizing the larger issue, that the canon was also opening to include women writers.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, by the end of the twentieth century the reading public was becoming much more visibly female, particularly with the popularity of Oprah’s Book Club on television, a medium that allowed the books’ audiences, in the form of

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99. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 15.

100. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 180.

101. For more on Fadiman’s attitudes toward women, see Fadiman, *The Wine Lover’s Daughter* and Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Fadiman, Barzun, Trilling* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

studio audiences, to be seen.<sup>102</sup> Fadiman's handling of *Jane Eyre* is a clear example of the power that one influential listmaker can have over the reading of those who follow him and, as a result, over the canon itself. Had Fadiman not realized his error, he may never have included *Jane Eyre* on his list at all, but because he considers this to be a singular error rather than a larger shift, he has prevented himself from including the many other important works by women writers on his revised list. Only six of the additions made between 1960 and 1997 were by women authors and, of the fourteen newest works included on the *New Lifetime Reading Plan* list, not a single one of them were written by women authors. By characterizing his omission as an error to be corrected rather than acknowledging the feminist movement and its impact on literary studies, Fadiman has greatly limited his middlebrow readers.

### **Book List Books and the Changing Canon**

*The New Lifetime Reading Plan*'s cover advertises it as "the classic guide to world literature, revised and expanded." Book list books, like their college English department counterparts, are always changing yet rely upon a narrative of endurance. Fadiman himself acknowledges that writers' reputations fluctuate in his updated entry for George Eliot:

It may interest only historians of literature, but there does exist a kind of shadowy stock exchange on which the reputations of established writers fluctuate, though not wildly. During the last fifty years or so the stock of Shaw [99] and Wordsworth [64] may have slipped a few points. That of O'Neill [115], Forster [108], Kafka [112], Donne [40], Boswell [59], and Tocqueville [71] has probably risen. With George Eliot the rise has been marked.<sup>103</sup>

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102. For more on the significant impact of Oprah's Book Club, see Mark R. Hall, "The 'Oprahfication' of Literacy: Reading 'Oprah's Book Club,'" *College English* 65, no. 6 (2003): 646-67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3594275>; Farr, *Reading Oprah*; Rooney, *Reading with Oprah*; Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow"; Farr and Harker, eds., *The Oprah Affect*; Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*; and Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*.

103. Fadiman and Major, *New Lifetime Reading Plan*, 192-93.

Works that were previously dismissed as unimportant gained traction through the feminist movement, civil rights movement, and canon debates. Even so, the “new” *Plan* is, paradoxically, a “classic guide.” Perhaps, in order to engage readers in a plan that will last a lifetime, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan* must to some extent deny its own history. Although readers want to read texts that will be relevant to their lives at the end of the twentieth century, they must also believe that the reading in which they are investing has endured and will continue to endure.

In *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, Gerald Graff urges English professors to “teach the conflicts.” By this, he means that professors should engage students in questions of canonicity and literary value and show students that there are multiple ways of looking at a text, which will both better engage them in class and help them understand how to participate in intellectual discussions.<sup>104</sup> Book list books do not entirely “teach the conflicts.” Instead, their mediation provides the outcomes of those conflicts; while listmakers may explain the criteria they have used to assemble their own version of the literary canon, they do not necessarily invite readers to make their own value judgments. In the late twentieth century, this means that book listmakers take sides in the canon debates, and their mediation reflects varying levels of transparency. Fadiman and Major’s *New Lifetime Reading Plan* is an attempt to open the literary canon for middlebrow readers, but this opening is limited by tokenism, a denial of larger movements such as feminism that have impacted our understanding of literary value, and a narrow understanding of their diverse audience of middlebrow readers.

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104. Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*.

Book listmakers throughout history have incredible power over what their readers read and, on a larger scale, which texts are canonized. In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Jane Tompkins explicates the role of anthology editors in creating the canon. Tompkins finds that editors describe their selections as reflecting self-evident literary value, denying their own agency in determining what literary value means to them.<sup>105</sup> Book listmakers similarly consider their lists as an attempt to record the greatest works in human history without defining “greatness,” a concept that turns out to shift over time. As Tompkins argues, the canon’s “obviousness is not a natural fact; it is constantly being produced and maintained by cultural activity: by literary anthologies, by course syllabi, book reviews, magazine articles, book club selections, [and] radio and television programs.”<sup>106</sup> I propose adding book list books to Tompkins’ list, as these lists likewise shape readers’ understanding of the literary canon while obfuscating the nature of its ongoing recreation. Listmakers are never neutral parties. They are the product of their own circumstances and generations, and their decisions impact the literary canon itself.

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105. Tompkins, “‘But Is It Any Good?’: The Institutionalization of Literary Value” in *Sensational Designs*.

106. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 193.

## Chapter 3

### The Healing Power of Twenty-First-Century Middlebrow Reading

For many people, reading fiction remains the supreme pleasure. Many recall it as a first milestone reached and the great joy of childhood, only eventually partially obscured by the forced education of school and university, when reading all too often becomes a painful duty rather than a delight. But, somehow, the joy of the novel remains. It is the silent pleasure, the offspring of loneliness or absorption, the nurse of daydreams and reflections, the mistress of the passions, the instigator of adventure and change. And it can literally change lives.

—Peter Ackroyd, Preface to *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*

In *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*, Beth Driscoll argues that the twenty-first century is the site of a new middlebrow: an extension of the previous middlebrow with important distinctions for a new era. Driscoll defines the new literary middlebrow as “middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest.”<sup>1</sup> Driscoll’s definition accounts for the multifaceted nature of the middlebrow, yet it continues to locate the middlebrow in objects, audiences, and institutions. In considering book list books in the early twenty-first century, I build upon Driscoll’s definition, expanding it to also conceive of the new literary middlebrow as a mode of reading that is purposeful and mediated in response to the realities of a new age in which everything, from readers’ internal lives to the greater world they live in, seems broken. In particular, book list books mediate through new forms of cultural authority to promote inwardly oriented and individually relevant middlebrow reading as a means of healing.

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1. Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6.



In the twenty-first-century United States, the middlebrow mode of reading responds to a pervasive sense of being broken, a feeling that something is deeply wrong with individuals, society, the nation, and the world. The new millennium began with worldwide fear of massive technology malfunctions due to the Y2K bug. Shortly thereafter, the September 11 terror attacks were the deadliest in human history, leading to an ongoing war and making Americans feel they were no longer safe in their own country. The nation continues to fragment regarding political loyalties, access to quality healthcare and education, socioeconomic status, and treatment based on race, gender, ability, and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Climate change threatens in the short term when it comes to floods, fires, and hurricanes, and in the long term with the possibility of an uninhabitable planet. In 2020, a global pandemic brought the economy to a screeching halt, closing schools and businesses and keeping everyone at home to slow the spread of the virus and prevent the United States' healthcare system from collapsing. If all of this weren't enough, the period is underscored by a persistent narrative that people—and especially women—are anxious, incapable, and in need of fixing.<sup>3</sup> In the early twenty-first century, the middlebrow mode of reading's primary purpose is to relieve this anxiety and help readers to recover from everything that seems to be going wrong through reading literature that is relevant to the individual reader's life.

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2. For more on some of these conditions and the resulting divides, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) and Linda Tirado, *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014).

3. For more on the ways in which happiness and confidence are undermined, see Ruth Whippman, *America the Anxious: How Our Pursuit of Happiness is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016) and Myrna Blyth, *Spin Sisters: How the Women of the Media Sell Unhappiness—and Liberalism—to the Women of America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005).

The nature of middlebrow mediation has also shifted because electronic and web-based media began to reshape the ways in which people accessed and interacted with culture beginning in the mid-1990s. A side effect of Chris Anderson's concept of "the long tail," in which digital media make available cultural products that would otherwise go out of print, is the ability to filter searches online, allowing for niche markets of all kinds because consumers are able to find what is just right for them in ways that they couldn't before.<sup>4</sup> Mass culture still exists, but it has become "less mass" as these niches have taken over greater shares of the market.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, the emergence of new media has challenged the isolated roles of producer and consumer such that individuals are no longer content to passively consume media but instead participate by manipulating existing media and creating their own content.<sup>6</sup> Culture is influenced both from the top down, as it always has been, and from the bottom up, by consumers.<sup>7</sup> Now, consumers not only turn to vetted authorities to determine what to buy, but also to each other through online videos, blogs, social media, and retail site reviews. This allows consumers to get their recommendations from people just like them in terms of interests, education, class, gender, race, sexuality, or any other commonality imaginable. Reading culture has also experienced these shifts in authority. In the 1990s, megabookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble stocked an unprecedented number of books on their shelves, and then

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4. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 119.

5. Anderson, *The Long Tail*, 181-82.

6. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

7. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 18.

the online retailer Amazon, founded to sell books in 1994, even more dramatically expanded the variety of titles available to consumers. These stores gave readers access to a vast number of texts, and online communities and blogs gave readers access to one another, enabling them to form niche groups of readers with similar interests.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural authority has also undergone a major shift and democratization. As Jim Collins discusses at length in *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*, readers at the turn of the twenty-first century not only accepted new cultural arbiters, such as amateur book reviewers who post online, but also rejected those, like book critics for major publications, who were previously considered literary authorities. Amateur readers from diverse backgrounds became more confident in their own ability to read challenging texts outside the classroom at precisely the same time as they lost confidence in traditional literary authorities to tell them how and what to read. Readers began to discover that they read for different purposes than did professional readers such as academics and critics, and they sought out those who would recommend books for the purpose of enjoyment.<sup>9</sup> Many readers turned to websites, rather than books, for their book lists, though doing so could easily lead to what Jane Mallison calls “list fatigue,” feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of specialized reading lists available and the exhaustion of trying to choose among the books on them. Mallison finds that online reading lists can become nothing more than meaningless lists of names because

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8. For a discussion of how online spaces and retailers shift authority in book recommendation, see David Wright, “Literary Taste and List Culture in a Time of ‘Endless Choice,’” in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). For an explanation of related changes in bookselling practices, see “Providing for the Sovereign Consumer: Selecting and Recommending Books,” in Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

9. Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 19-20, 45-46.

the weight of the recommendation is lost in the depersonalized experience of the internet space.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the widespread availability of online book lists compiled by amateurs and nontraditional media sources, legacy publishers continue producing book lists in book form, lending the authority of a publishing house and its resources to the recommendations. At the same time, publishers have embraced new voices as cultural arbiters. Whereas in previous years only literary insiders such as those associated with publications or educational institutions published book list books, at the turn of the twentieth century readers have preferred to connect with listmakers in a more personal manner. Book list books like *Book Sense Best Books: 125 Favorite Books Recommended by Independent Booksellers*, *Read This!: Handpicked Favorites from America's Indie Bookstores*, and *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die: A Life-Changing List* were developed from the recommendations of independent booksellers in order to replicate the intimate experience of visiting a quirky local bookstore.<sup>11</sup> *You've Got to Read This Book! 55 People Tell the Story of the Book That Changed Their Life* and *My Ideal Bookshelf* compile reading lists from cultural figures, tapping into Americans' fascination with the everyday lives of celebrities.<sup>12</sup> *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books* and *What Should I Read Next?: 70 University of Virginia Professors Recommend Readings in*

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10. Jane Mallison, *Book Smart: Your Essential Reading List for Becoming a Literary Genius in 365 Days* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), xii.

11. Book Sense, *Book Sense Best Books: 125 Favorite Books Recommended by Independent Booksellers* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004); Hans Weyandt, ed., *Read This!: Handpicked Favorites from America's Indie Bookstores* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2012); James Mustich, *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die: A Life-Changing List* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2018).

12. Jack Canfield and Gay Hendricks, *You've Got to Read This Book! 55 People Tell the Story of the Book That Changed Their Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Thessaly La Force, *My Ideal Bookshelf* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 2012).

*History, Politics, Literature, Math, Science, Technology, the Arts, and More* feature the recommendations of writers and professors, respectively, across many fields rather than only literature, allowing readers to emulate the reading practices of those they may admire.<sup>13</sup> The presence of these new book listmakers is yet another indication that cultural authority and middlebrow mediation have shifted. Furthermore, because each of these book list books is a compilation of recommendations from many listmakers rather than a single list provided by just one, twenty-first century readers are exposed to the recommendations of a much more diverse group of listmakers, even within a single book list book.

Even as reading culture has changed, book list books continue to advance a middlebrow mode of reading in the twenty-first century. At the same time, such books as Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin's *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You* and Kevin Smokler's *Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven't Touched Since High School* resist larger hegemonic systems by providing a platform for alternative cultural mediators, critiquing mainstream education systems, and empowering readers to engage in self-transformation. Twenty-first-century book list books envision readers as broken people living in a broken world that is changing faster than ever. Though the middlebrow is often considered to be a homogeneous, consumerist behemoth, book list books promise personal healing, whether that be mental, spiritual, emotional, or sometimes even physical, through reading practices. The book list books in this chapter complete the middlebrow mode of reading's

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13. Peder J. Zane, ed., *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books* (New York: Norton, 2007); Jessica R. Feldman and Robert Stilling, eds., *What Should I Read Next?: 70 University of Virginia Professors Recommend Readings in History, Politics, Literature, Math, Science, Technology, the Arts, and More* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

turn from the outward-facing pursuit of cultural capital and social mobility at the beginning of the twentieth century to the inward-oriented search for relevance and healing in the early twenty-first century.

### **“Books to cure what ails you”: Bibliotherapy and *The Novel Cure***

Elements of bibliotherapy—using books for therapeutic purposes—have always been present to a certain extent in middlebrow reading practices because middlebrow readers tend to use books to improve themselves in some way. Adler’s *How to Read a Book* and Fadiman’s *The Lifetime Reading Plan* both position reading the right books as a means to self-improvement, though their purposes are more intellectual than personal. In the early twenty-first century, several book list books appeared with a strong emphasis on bibliotherapy, including Nancy Peske and Beverly West’s *Bibliotherapy: The Girl’s Guide to Books for Every Phase of Our Lives*, Nancy Peal’s *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* and subsequent *Book Lust* titles, and Hallie Ephron’s *1001 Books for Every Mood*.<sup>14</sup> Bibliotherapeutic book list books, even when they do not explicitly acknowledge their audience as in the case of Peske and West, are primarily aimed at female readers, thus responding to the narrative that twenty-first century American women are deficient and need to undertake self-improvement.

The most explicitly bibliotherapeutic of these book list books is *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You*, written by Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin and published in 2013 by Canongate in the United

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14. Nancy Peske and Beverly West, *Bibliotherapy: The Girl’s Guide to Books for Every Phase of Our Lives* (New York: Dell Publishing, 2001); Nancy Pearl, *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2003); and Hallie Ephron, *1001 Books for Every Mood* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2008). For a discussion of some of these book list books in the context of book prescription programs, See Leah Price, “Prescribed Reading,” in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 119-42.

Kingdom and Penguin in the United States. As the subtitle suggests, the recommended readings are organized by “ailment”: each entry includes a brief description of the ailment followed by one or more book recommendations that briefly indicate why the selection would be useful in soothing the ailment. Most of the ailments are physical (“man flu”), mental (“demons, facing your”), interpersonal (“mother-in-law, having a”), or situational (“coffee, can’t find a decent cup of”). Also included throughout are thirty “reading ailments,” the sorts of afflictions that plague readers in particular, such as “busy to read, being too” and “depletion of library through lending.” Additionally, although most ailment entries recommend only a title or two, there are forty lists of the ten best novels for various situations from “going cold turkey” to “curing xenophobia” scattered throughout the text. *The Novel Cure* has been a success, with several international editions,<sup>15</sup> a paperback release in 2015, and an updated hardcover edition in 2017. Berthoud and Elderkin also developed *The Story Cure: An A-Z of Books to Keep Kids Happy, Healthy and Wise*, a book intended to help parents guide their children’s reading, again using a bibliotherapeutic approach, in 2016.

This wave of bibliotherapeutic book list books in the twenty-first century occurs in response to the pervasive narrative that those living during this time, and especially American women, are insufficient, broken, and in need of fixing. The bibliotherapeutic book list book serves the same type of reader in the twenty-first century that Oprah’s Book Club served in the late twentieth century. It encourages readers to place themselves at the center of their reading, using the recommended books to better understand, heal,

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15. Unless otherwise noted, all of my references to *The Novel Cure* refer to the first American edition because this project focuses on book list books available to American readers.

and transform themselves.<sup>16</sup> Berthoud and Elderkin's *The Novel Cure* takes this bibliotherapeutic perspective to an extreme, making the inwardly-oriented healing purpose for twenty-first-century middlebrow reading both explicit and literal and drawing upon a false medical authority in its mediation so that middlebrow readers, especially female readers, are able to quickly find novels that will be relevant to their lives.

### Bibliotherapy

The term "bibliotherapy" that Berthoud and Elderkin employ was coined by Samuel McChord Crothers, whose 1916 *Atlantic Monthly* piece titled "A Literary Clinic" imagines a bibliotherapy office in a former church. Inside, Bagster, an old friend of the narrator, prescribes literature to promote "right thoughts" in his "patients." He enthusiastically details his new venture, telling the narrator, "A book may be a stimulant or a sedative or an irritant or a soporific. The point is that it must do something to you, and you ought to know what it is."<sup>17</sup> Although originally intended as a humorous critique of the turn from religion to science and medicine, Crothers' description led to a new interest in reading for therapeutic purposes.

However, the underlying concept that words can heal has much earlier origins. The earliest use was likely that of shamans and witch doctors chanting poetry, and in the 4<sup>th</sup>

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16. For more on the ways in which nonprofessional readers use fiction to understand the self in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, see Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005); and Kate Douglas, "Your Book Changed My Life: Everyday Literary Criticism in Oprah's Book Club," in *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Book Club*, ed. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

17. Samuel McChord Crothers, "A Literary Clinic." *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1916, 292, accessed August 20, 2018, ProQuest Research Library.



century BCE, Egyptians ingested inscribed papyrus intended to heal.<sup>18</sup> The Greeks and the Romans associated language with mental health. Both cultures constructed texts intended to release emotions through catharsis,<sup>19</sup> and inscriptions above entrances to Greek libraries designate them as “medicine for the soul.”<sup>20</sup> Some disagreed with this belief in the healing power of reading. Most famously, Plato cautions in the *Phaedrus* that reading is dangerous because it causes people to rely upon texts rather than their memories and does not allow them to question the author about meaning like oratory does.<sup>21</sup> Despite this caution, reading took hold as a transformative technology, and the connection between words and healing persisted.

Bibliotherapy expanded and was formalized in Europe and the United States. In the late eighteenth century, bibliotherapy began to be used in institutional settings, specifically for the treatment of the mentally ill, the hospitalized, and the incarcerated, who were advised to read both fiction and religious texts to keep them calm, occupy their time, and help them recover.<sup>22</sup> These institutions established their own libraries, and when the first trained librarian used books to treat hospitalized patients suffering from mental illness in 1904, bibliotherapy began to be associated with librarianship.<sup>23</sup>

Bibliotherapy expanded further during World War I, when libraries were built for Army

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18. Janella D. Moy, “Reading and Writing One’s Way to Wellness: The History of Bibliotherapy and Scriptotherapy,” in *New Directions in Literature and Medicine Studies*, ed. Stephanie M. Hilger (New York: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017), 16.

19. Moy, “Reading and Writing One’s Way to Wellness,” 16.

20. Rhea Joyce Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1978), 13.

21. Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 277a-b; 275e.

22. Moy, “Reading and Writing One’s Way to Wellness,” 18.

23. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy*, 14.

hospitals. As a result, Veterans Administration librarians were responsible for much of the bibliotherapy research after the war in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>24</sup> The mid-twentieth century saw an expansion of reading for mental health, and the late twentieth century produced bibliotherapy journal articles and college courses.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, various forms of bibliotherapy were used in all sorts of helping professions, involving many different populations and age groups. In their work on the history of bibliotherapy, both Brewster and Moy explain that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has not been clear who is qualified to be a bibliotherapist and what the credentials for this work should be. Psychologists and librarians often take on these roles, but they do so with minimal training and, in some cases, concern from others within their professions.<sup>26</sup> Because there has been so much variety in the field of bibliotherapy, who practices it, and who is served by it, there has not been a true consensus regarding which types of books are therapeutic. Instead, bibliotherapists have focused on recommending the right reading for specific readers under specific circumstances.

Nonetheless, as the field of bibliotherapy gained traction, stakeholders worked to define it. In her 1978 *Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, Rhea Joyce Rubin, a foundational figure in the field of bibliotherapy as it relates to library science, focuses her definition primarily on group bibliotherapy, defining bibliotherapy as “a program of activity based on the interactive processes of media and the people who experience it. Print or nonprint material, either imaginative or informational is

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24. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy*, 14.

25. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy*, 14.

26. Liz Brewster, “Books on Prescription: Bibliotherapy in the United Kingdom,” *Journal of Hospital Librarianship* 9, no. 4 (October 2009): 401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15323260903253456>; Moy, “Reading and Writing One’s Way to Wellness,” 20.

experienced and discussed with the aid of a facilitator.”<sup>27</sup> Later definitions tend to simplify in order to encompass a broader range of bibliotherapeutic purposes and experiences. In 1980, Cornett and Cornett define bibliotherapy as “the use of books to help people.”<sup>28</sup> More recently, in 2009, Brewster writes that “bibliotherapy involves using any text to improve physical or emotional well-being, through reading, discussing, and facilitating a greater understanding.”<sup>29</sup> The literature also defines various types of bibliotherapy, including “institutional bibliotherapy,” “clinical bibliotherapy,” “developmental bibliotherapy,” “interactive bibliotherapy,” and “reading bibliotherapy.”<sup>30</sup> For the purposes of my discussion of book list books in relation to bibliotherapy, however, I will focus on bibliotherapy broadly conceived as well as Brewster’s conception of “creative bibliotherapy,” which she defines as “the use of fiction and poetry to work with individuals and groups to promote better mental health.”<sup>31</sup>

Studies have found bibliotherapy to be both beneficial and effective. Keith Oatley’s work focuses on the therapeutic effects of fiction in particular and sees fiction as a way for readers to simulate experiences that allow them to experience real emotions. He found that the experience of emotion while reading fiction, as well as the context to understand that emotion, increased the likelihood that a reader would gain personal insights from

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27. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy*, 2.

28. Claudia E. Cornett and Charles F. Cornett, *Bibliotherapy: The Right Book at the Right Time*, Fastback; 151 (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1980), 8.

29. Brewster, “Books on Prescription,” 400.

30. These specific types of bibliotherapy aren’t relevant to my discussion of bibliotherapy in the context of book list books. For further explanation, see Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy* and A. M. Hynes and A. Hynes-Berry, *Bibliotherapy: The Interactive Process* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986).

31. Brewster, “Books on Prescription,” 400.

their reading.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Laura J. Cohen found that an essential element of therapeutic reading was that readers needed to recognize themselves in order to gain therapeutic effects. Furthermore, readers reported the results of bibliotherapy as comparable to the results of other therapeutic interventions, even when bibliotherapy did not involve discussion with others, which has positive implications for those who may have limited access to other forms of therapy.<sup>33</sup> These studies, both of which focus on fiction though the field of bibliotherapy recommends a variety of genres, confirm what many readers already know: reading can improve wellbeing.

Although the self-improvement promoted by earlier book list books is related to bibliotherapy, there are some notable differences as middlebrow purposes for reading shifts from outwardly motivated to inwardly motivated. Adler and Fadiman's purposes for reading are quite academic in nature, arguing that readers should use the classics to improve their minds. Bibliotherapeutic book listmakers recognize a need for healing in the increasingly female fiction readers of the twenty-first century, and they use their lists to show readers how books can be immediately relevant to their lives and help ease their problems. For these book listmakers, it is not necessarily the academic mind of the general reader that needs to improve but rather the emotional mind. While this is not the only thread of middlebrow reading that is evident in twenty-first century book list books, the fact that bibliotherapy emerges as a trend indicates that the needs of readers have changed, and readers are now looking to literature to heal themselves.

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32. Keith Oatley, "Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation," *Review of General Psychology* 3, no. 2 (1999): 113-15. Oatley offers a more extensive discussion in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

33. Laura J. Cohen, "Phenomenology of Therapeutic Reading with Implications for Research and Practice of Bibliotherapy" *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 21, no. 1 (1994): 39-44.

## Berthoud and Elderkin as Medical Doctors

*The Novel Cure* serves as an extreme example of a bibliotherapeutic book list book, making the healing purpose of middlebrow reading both explicit and literal. Throughout *The Novel Cure*, Berthoud and Elderkin exaggerate bibliotherapy's potential to heal by describing opportunities for self-improvement as "ailments;" recommended books as "prescriptions," "medicines," and "cures;" and, perhaps most notably, positioning themselves as medical doctors who diagnose and prescribe.

The concept of book listmaker as medical doctor draws upon false medical authority to give more weight to the recommendations in *The Novel Cure* and bibliotherapy more broadly. Outside of their work on this book, both Berthoud and Elderkin have offered in-person and remote bibliotherapy services through the School of Life in London since 2008.<sup>34</sup> However, both are better known for their creative work: Berthoud is a painter, and Elderkin is a novelist.<sup>35</sup> In *The Novel Cure*, they create entirely new personas to situate themselves as doctors, resulting in a different kind of authority as cultural mediators. Twenty-first-century readers may be skeptical of those claiming cultural authority because the concept of culture is considered subjective, and the field of bibliotherapy lacks formal credentialing for bibliotherapists, so Berthoud and Elderkin draw upon the authority of one of the most respected and highly credentialed professions: medicine. By rhetorically positioning themselves as medical doctors and their readers as patients seeking treatment, Berthoud and Elderkin establish a relationship of implicit and

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34. Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You* (New York: Penguin, 2013), dust jacket.

35. James McNamara, "Cures for Everything That Ails You, from Flu to Wanderlust." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 27, 2013, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/cures-for-everything-that-ails-you--from-flu-to-wanderlust-20130926-2uf2q.html>.

instant trust in which they as bibliotherapists always know best. But because they lack degrees, licenses, or any other credentials that would establish their authority, they use respected medical language and personas to establish trust with readers who have come to question cultural authority. Additionally, although Berthoud and Elderkin clearly intend to establish authority through these personas, it is important to note that the role of the medical doctor may have unintended effects on some American readers. People of color have a long history of abuse within the medical system in the United States, leading to a hesitance to trust medical doctors. The medical concerns of women also tend to be downplayed or disregarded in a clinical setting, sometimes even by female healthcare providers, which means that many women readers may be used to doctors who do not listen to or believe them. There is no indication in the text that Berthoud and Elderkin were considering these concerns as they developed their personas, but they may impact readers' ability to engage with the text or willingness to pick it up in the first place.

The medical personas that Berthoud and Elderkin have created for themselves extend beyond the text of *The Novel Cure* and into both real and virtual spaces. The authors toured extensively to promote their book and made appearances at literary festivals both at home (Elderkin now resides in the United States; Berthoud in England) and abroad. Many of these events featured Berthoud and Elderkin wearing white coats, and some of them also included an ambulance designed for attendees to step into for their consultations.<sup>36</sup> These theatrical elements had the effect of instilling an air of authority and expertise and of setting up a patient-doctor relationship in which Berthoud and Elderkin, as doctors, took readers' problems seriously rather than brushing them off as

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36. "News," *The Novel Cure*, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://thenovelcure.com/news>

some medical doctors might. Additionally, Berthoud and Elderkin provide readers with constant access to this “medical” help through the “Surgery” portion of their website. This page enables readers to reach out with questions via twitter and an online submission form so that they never have to be without the prescriptions of a bibliotherapist.<sup>37</sup> The medical language and relationships established within and around *The Novel Cure* can certainly be perceived as—and were perhaps intended to be—ironic, inviting readers to take less seriously their impulse to turn to books to solve their problems. However, using *The Novel Cure* as intended means accepting Berthoud and Elderkin’s authority as cultural mediators and suspending disbelief in the hope that books might, in fact, be able to “cure what ails you.”

Much as these interactions contribute to the establishment of the bibliotherapists as medical authorities, some of the events break down this same authority because participants are asked to prescribe books as cures to one another.<sup>38</sup> No one would expect those who enjoy television medical dramas to prescribe drugs, yet Berthoud and Elderkin ask literary enthusiasts to prescribe books to one another as cures. Berthoud and Elderkin, like other twenty-first-century cultural arbiters, interact with their readers and encourage them to interact with one another. The result is a flattening of authority whereby no one is required to have credentials to make recommendations and everyone, regardless of experience, can prescribe cures. Access to the internet during this period enables these niche interactions, but it is not the only reason for the flattening of authority. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the credentials that have been drawn upon for generations

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37. “Surgery,” *The Novel Cure*, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://thenovelcure.com/surgery>

38. “News,” *The Novel Cure*, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://thenovelcure.com/news>

come into question, and cultural mediators are able to establish their own authority in new and alternative ways, with book listmaker as medical doctor being only one extreme example.

### Readers' Ailments

The organization of *The Novel Cure* positions all ailments as equal, resulting in another type of flattening. There is no distinction between the different types of ailments, whether they be physical, mental, interpersonal, situational, or related to reading, because the ailments are organized alphabetically and have entries of approximately equal length. Entries for both “happiness, searching for” and the more ridiculous “stubbed toe” include a reflection on the ailment and a novel intended to cure it with no suggestion that one ailment is any more or less serious than the other. Although this leveling of ailments may at times seem a bit absurd and certainly ironic, it also demonstrates empathy. Early in the introduction, Berthoud and Elderkin write, “whether you’ve got the hiccups or a hangover, a fear of commitment or a sense of humor failure, we consider it an ailment that deserves a remedy.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, readers will find *The Novel Cure* much more enjoyable when read with a fully intact sense of humor. Furthermore, the international contract for *The Novel Cure* allows for cultural adaptation such that up to 25 percent of the content may be adjusted to both reflect ailments specific to each country and include novels written by writers who are from those countries.<sup>40</sup> This cultural adaptation and organization serve as an attempt to be comprehensive in treating any ailment readers may find themselves with, though, unfortunately, there is no entry for “dissertation, writing a.”

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39. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, xi.

40. Ceridwen Dovey, “Can Reading Make You Happier?” *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2015, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/can-reading-make-you-happier>



Because *The Novel Cure* focuses on curing ailments rather than becoming more well-read or a better citizen, the book has a broader intended audience than do other book list books. Readers are not expected to have a certain education level or amount of free time. Instead, the only expectation for the audience of *The Novel Cure* is that readers will recognize something in themselves that they would like to improve upon, which applies to most anyone given the twenty-first-century sense of the self as a broken person in a broken world. Any reader could find an ailment that applies to them, if not in the typical ailment entries, then in one of the lists of the best novels for each decade of life, from teenagers to those over one hundred years old. Furthermore, the reader only has to commit to a cure of one or two novels rather than an entire course of reading. These cures are taken independently of one another. There is no progression as in courses of reading like Adler's where the listmaker shows readers that understanding of one text relies upon familiarity with those that came before it, although Berthoud and Elderkin do advise reading using the mediation of a bibliotherapist as a long-term practice. Despite this broad appeal, *The Novel Cure* does not provide reading instruction. This means that the authors assume either that the reader is already skillful and does not require instruction or that even an unskilled reader will be able to cure their ailments through reading. Because this lack of reading instruction and the variety of cures allow for a broad intended audience, *The Novel Cure* invites an understanding of the middlebrow as a mediated, purposeful mode of reading.

To use *The Novel Cure* as intended, readers must first determine what ails them, thereby acknowledging their own deficiencies. In this way, *The Novel Cure* participates in what Timothy Aubry refers to as "therapeutic culture," a pervasive force that continually

identifies new diagnoses which it then purports to treat. With each new diagnosable disorder, more people are able to name something that is wrong, and the therapy industry presents itself as the solution to manage that disorder, which never would have been diagnosed without the therapeutic field itself. The cycle then continues, with new diagnoses and new therapeutic solutions. The therapeutic became such a common currency in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century that deficiency and dysfunction have become the default state rather than the exception.<sup>41</sup>

Self-help literature seems to offer the possibility of overcoming these deficiencies, but, as Micki McGee argues in *Self-Help, Inc: Makeover Culture in American Life*, it actually perpetuates an ongoing cycle of insufficiency and inadequacy in which everyone must always improve upon something that is lacking.<sup>42</sup> Other book list books certainly begin from a place of readers' deficiency, as they seek to help readers gain something from their reading: one can only gain what one does not already have. The blunt and explicit approach to deficiency makes *The Novel Cure* different. It suggests that readers can cure the deficiencies they have identified, but once one ailment has been cured, another will surely follow. *The Novel Cure* places readers in the position of always having something more to gain from their reading but having no possibility of achieving a larger long-term goal, whether that is being well read or free from ailments. Furthermore, this perpetual cycle has readers continually consuming—and likely buying—more books to solve their problems. Unlike teachers, who seek to create

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41. Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 20.

42. Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 18. Ruth Whippman also addresses this in *America the Anxious*.

independent students and make themselves obsolete, bibliotherapy is motivated by ongoing intervention that both sells more books and sustains the profession.

*The Novel Cure*'s organization by ailment puts the importance of finding relevance in what one reads at the forefront. While many of the ailments are broadly applicable, some of them clearly apply to certain factions of the intended audience. There are entries for ailments affecting both men and women's position in a traditional, heterosexual family structure, but there are far more ailments relating to women's experiences in the family and home than to men's. Whereas men have only "fatherhood," women have "children, under pressure to have" (which recommends Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, a novel centering on the experience of reluctant motherhood), "pregnancy," "childbirth," "housewife, being a," and "motherhood." This discrepancy not only suggests that Berthoud and Elderkin were writing to a primarily female audience, but also pathologizes the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, making them ailments to be cured rather than natural parts of many women's lives. A related issue arises in Berthoud and Elderkin's treatment of oppression. The entries on xenophobia and homophobia perplexingly address the xenophobic or homophobic person, requiring the individual to recognize these problems within themselves before taking up the recommended novel. Perhaps Berthoud and Elderkin are making their own small attempt to cure the larger issues of xenophobia and homophobia in the world through reading novels to change individual minds. Elsewhere, however, the racism entry recommends Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* primarily to those experiencing racism, and the coming out entry addresses LGBTQ readers directly. The sheer number of ailments that Berthoud and Elderkin approach in *The Novel Cure* suggests that they have tried to find a novel that

will be relevant to each reader's life with the intention of reaching as broad of an audience as possible.

### Books as Medicine

In *The Novel Cure*, Berthoud and Elderkin make the relevance and healing purpose of middlebrow reading explicit and literal by framing books as medicine that can cure readers' ailments. The opening line of the introduction describes *The Novel Cure* not as a book about books, but rather as "a medical handbook—with a difference."<sup>43</sup> In this case, the difference is that the prescribed medicines are not ingested or topically applied, but rather read:

Our medicines are not something you'll find at the drugstore, but at the bookshop, in the library, or downloaded onto your electronic reading device. We are bibliotherapists, and the tools of our trade are books. Our apothecary contains Balzacian balms and Tolstoyan tourniquets, the salves of Saramago and the purges of Perec and Proust. To create it, we have trawled two thousand years of literature for the most brilliant minds and restorative reads, from Apuleius, second-century author of *The Golden Ass*, to the contemporary tonics of Ali Smith and Jonathan Franzen.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, and indeed throughout *The Novel Cure*, books are equated with physical objects in a medicine cabinet, articulating a tension that permeates middlebrow reading as whole. Readers simultaneously have access to exactly what they need but require substantial mediation to find it. Considered within the *Novel Cure* framework, medicine is everywhere: "at the bookshop, in the library, or downloaded onto your electronic reading device."<sup>45</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of that access, readers feel they need mediators to tell them which of the treatments to apply to their ailment just as they might

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43. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, xi.

44. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, xi.

45. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, xi.

go to a medical doctor because they don't know how to treat a physical problem.

Berthoud and Elderkin further this perception by shrouding their recommendations in a cloud of mystery, using the old-timey language of the apothecary and referencing authors in this initial passage that many readers would find intimidating or perhaps even unrecognizable. Berthoud and Elderkin thus use their book to establish a problem that they will then provide the solution for, which is also a common but problematic move in self-help.

Because it aims to cure readers' ailments, the *Novel Cure* list is not intended to be an objective compilation of the universally best books but rather a directory to aid readers in finding the best books for their specific situations. As a result, the organization of *The Novel Cure* discourages readers from completing the list because some of the ailments, such as "ambition, too much" and "ambition, not enough," for example, directly oppose one another. The approach of selecting the best book for each reader given their particular circumstances comprises a more intimate form of book recommendation that prioritizes the reader's need to find a book relevant to their own situation over a monolithic understanding of those books universally considered to be the best. Additionally, this subjective approach to book recommendation aligns with an understanding of the middlebrow as a mode of reading in which readers might engage at some times and not at others. Thus, readers can choose to engage in a middlebrow mode of reading when it suits them and may read in more highbrow or lowbrow ways at other times.

To the extent that it is possible in a book, as opposed to a one-on-one bibliotherapy session, Berthoud and Elderkin work hard in *The Novel Cure* to mediate what their readers read, making this book list book an extreme example of middlebrow mediation.

In the entry for the reading ailment “overwhelmed by the number of books in the world,” Berthoud and Elderkin write that “extreme selectivity is the only solution. Reading time is hard to come by, and you don’t want to waste any of it on even a mediocre book. Reach for excellence every time.”<sup>46</sup> To be sure that each book is the best one for them, readers’ reading material must be heavily mediated by a bibliotherapist, which Berthoud and Elderkin accomplish in this medium by including only a few books as cures for each ailment. In his article on the history of bibliotherapy, Jesse Miller critiques this aspect of bibliotherapy, arguing that when a reader chooses texts based on prescriptions, “the patient-reader is rendered a passive object of medical power...and the book and its author are correlatively reduced to an instrumental use-value.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, unlike other book list books in which the listmaker suggests that readers will naturally be able to select their own quality reading after an indeterminate amount of mediation, adhering to the bibliotherapeutic model requires endless mediation. Just as we never diagnose our own physical maladies but continue seeing medical doctors, so too are middlebrow readers supposed to continue reading through the mediation of bibliotherapists.

### Curing What Ails You

The language of *The Novel Cure* regards the right books as not only medicine, but as “cures,” making it an extreme example of the twenty-first-century bibliotherapeutic book list book emphasizing the healing purpose of middlebrow reading. In fact, the word “cure” is used twice in the title of the book alone: *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment*

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46. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 286.

47. Jesse Miller, “Medicines of the Soul: Reparative Reading and the History of Bibliotherapy,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 51, no. 2 (June 2018): 27, accessed August 20, 2018, Project MUSE.

to *Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You*. Rather than varying the word choice, this title emphasizes the word “cure” to confirm that readers can fix what is wrong with them by using this book. When considering this title, one cannot help but be reminded of the “rest cure” and the “talking cure,” both used for psychotherapeutic purposes to treat hysteria—a previously common diagnosis for women—in the nineteenth century. At first, this reference to outdated, debunked, and misogynistic medical treatments in a book that is clearly aimed at female readers would seem to be an enormous error in judgment. However, Berthoud and Elderkin are presenting what they see as a new—“novel”—cure for modern ailments while using cover imagery and a writing style that evoke the apothecary to create a sense of history for bibliotherapy, a relatively young concept experiencing a renaissance in the twenty-first century moment.

Despite Berthoud and Elderkin’s efforts to engage bibliotherapy, the therapeutic model that *The Novel Cure* establishes is actually at odds with some of bibliotherapy’s core principles. In the foundational *Using Bibliotherapy: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, Rhea Joyce Rubin writes that, “self-motivated individual reading, personal interaction of a librarian or therapist with a user or client, and the concept of the library as a neutral and comforting center—while they may be therapeutic—are not bibliotherapy.”<sup>48</sup> Although Berthoud and Elderkin frequently encourage the use of a bibliotherapist, the way that they have set up *The Novel Cure* allows readers to use it for the self-motivated individual reading that Rubin excludes from her definition of bibliotherapy. Berthoud and Elderkin argue for the power of books, yet they leave it to readers to both diagnose and prescribe for themselves. The problem here is a lack of

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48. Rubin, *Using Bibliotherapy*, 2.

regulation, and it is a major issue with self-help books. Whereas drugs and research findings are vetted before becoming available to the public, there is no regulation for self-help books, allowing untested ideas like fad diets and exercise programs, for example, to become viral before they are properly tested.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, there is no way of knowing that readers will use *The Novel Cure* correctly or that the purported cures will have the desired effect: when readers trust the authority of listmakers who are only pretending to be medical doctors, they may find that the promised cures are likewise imaginary.

Berthoud and Elderkin account for these issues by providing a new definition for the word “cure” in their introduction, repurposing the term to better suit a middlebrow mode of reading:

Whatever your ailment, our prescriptions are simple: a novel (or two), to be read at regular intervals. Some treatments will lead to a complete cure. Others will simply offer solace, showing you that you are not alone. All will offer the temporary relief of your symptoms due to the power of literature to distract and transport.... As with all medicines, the full course of treatment should always be taken for best results.<sup>50</sup>

This passage relies heavily on medical language, but Berthoud and Elderkin’s understanding of a “cure” diverges substantially from the medical field. In this regard, any benefit that books can offer their readers, whether that be a complete cure in the medical sense or the ability to temporarily escape, is a worthy purpose for reading in the middlebrow mode. This revision reflects the desperation of the early twenty-first century: readers are so hurt, so broken in this moment that any relevance to their own lives, even the feeling that they are not alone in their pain, can provide comfort and perhaps even healing.

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49. Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publ, 1989), 4.

50. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, xii.



The possibility of being cured of ailments is further complicated because Berthoud and Elderkin's mediation doesn't account for differences in reader responses to the books they prescribe. We know from the work of reader-response scholars that readers do not all read in the same way, which can lead to drastically different experiences reading the same text.<sup>51</sup> Berthoud and Elderkin provide no reading instruction, and there is little indication of what readers should take away from each of the recommended books. While early book list books were often unannotated, this one, like many others published at this time, largely provides entertaining plot summary and character descriptions intended to convince the reader to read the novel. The reader, should they choose to take the novel cure that Berthoud and Elderkin have prescribed for their self-diagnosed ailment, is largely left to navigate that novel on their own. Without additional mediation (and, some reader-response theorists would argue, even with it), readers will likely have very different responses to and experiences with the prescribed novels. Readers are not able to take the course of treatment "as prescribed" because some readers' readings will not align with the way in which Berthoud and Elderkin read the same novels as they developed their cures. This is especially true given that Berthoud and Elderkin are educated, well-read white women from the United Kingdom: their reading experience is far from universal. If readers are using *The Novel Cure* as intended, they are reading for specific healing purposes, and the lack of mediation for the process of reading combined with reader response considerations mean that a cure is unachievable.

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51. For more on reader response theory, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980).

## The Middlebrow Literary Fake

At the same time as Berthoud and Elderkin promote a purposeful and mediated middlebrow mode of reading, they also denigrate the middlebrow reader that *Punch*, Woolf, and Macdonald envision. The entry for the reading ailment “well-read, desire to seem” opens by extolling the virtues of serious readers: “a well-read individual, particularly of novels, is likely to be more balanced, more mature, and of course more interesting to talk to.”<sup>52</sup> Berthoud and Elderkin then quickly change direction, rather harshly criticizing readers for their assumed history of pretending to read books that they have never read, thereby critiquing an unearned claim to cultural capital. Finally, they provide a list of “The Ten Best Novels for Seeming Well-Read,” noting that “the first five are simply essential; the second five will imply the existence of vast literary landscapes in your head.”<sup>53</sup> This title and approach align with the premise of bibliotherapy more broadly in that there are best books for particular readers at particular times in their lives rather than books that are objectively the best. For example, Catherine Sheldrick Ross critiques a book recommendation model based on reading the best texts as an “approach to reading that assumes that books in themselves can be ordered on a single, universal scale of value. Within this model, the best is absolute and unchanging. There is no room to take into account differing reading interests and abilities or to ask what is the best for this particular reader at this particular time looking for this particular reading experience.”<sup>54</sup> Even in a list of novels that the authors may generally consider the best,

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52. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 388.

53. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 389.

54. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, “Reader on Top: Public Libraries, Pleasure Reading, and Models of Reading,” *Library Trends* 57, no. 4 (2009): 632–656. Accessed September 19, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.0.0059>.

Berthoud and Elderkin resist this text-centered model by taking a personalized approach to purposeful reading, indicating how these novels will be relevant to readers whose purpose is to appear well-read.

Despite this outward-oriented purpose for reading, within the “well-read” entry, Berthoud and Elderkin make their disapproval of reading for social gain clear. The “well-read” entry includes advice regarding how to use limited literary knowledge to one’s advantage in social situations. Berthoud and Elderkin’s tone, however, indicates their distaste for reading for the purpose of social mobility: while purposeful reading is the primary goal of *The Novel Cure*, reading for social gain is held at arm’s length. This tone is evident from their odd choice for naming this reading ailment. Berthoud and Elderkin easily could have developed an entry for “well-read, desire to *be*,” outlining the steps and texts to become a well-read person like Adler and other earlier book listmakers do. Instead, they chose “well-read, desire to *seem*,” placing the reader in the role of “literary fake”<sup>55</sup> and falling into the limited conception of middlebrow reading that suggests it is done at the surface level and only for outward appearances. Other entries in *The Novel Cure* purport to cure even physical ailments such as a broken leg<sup>56</sup>. Of all the ailments in *The Novel Cure*, the desire to be or seem well-read is the only one that can be fully cured, in the traditional, comprehensive sense of the word, by reading alone. Berthoud and Elderkin’s choice to deny this possibility suggests that they believe their readers are either unwilling or incapable of becoming well-read, which is an unfair, disheartening,

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55. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 388, emphasis mine.

56. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 52.

and probably unlikely conclusion about the possibilities for purposeful middlebrow reading practices.

Fortunately, there is an element of hope for the reader in the final lines of the “well-read” entry when Berthoud and Elderkin write, “with luck, by the time you read to the end of this list, you’ll have acquired the taste for more. And then you won’t have to bluff anymore.”<sup>57</sup> The word “taste” has a dual meaning in this passage. First, it suggests that readers’ appetites will be whetted. Readers may first have wanted to read in order to impress others, but in the process of doing so, they should find other, inwardly-oriented purposes for reading. Second, it contributes to the larger middlebrow concern with mediation. In this passage, Berthoud and Elderkin suggest that readers’ personal taste can be developed and that they will eventually be self-sufficient enough to choose their own reading material. In this passage, to the exclusion of the rest of *The Novel Cure*, reading “The Ten Best Novels for Seeming Well-Read” may have the side effect of improving readers’ taste to the point where they no longer need bibliotherapeutic mediation.

The “well-read” entry is a final example of the way in which Berthoud and Elderkin draw upon a false medical authority in their mediation. Like hiding a dog’s medicine in a piece of bologna, they have created a list of recommended readings that will ostensibly make the reader appear more interesting in social situations but that will also covertly improve the reader’s taste along the way. By taking this cure, readers might inadvertently become better people when all they wanted was to make small talk at parties. Like the other entries in *The Novel Cure*, “The Ten Best Novels for Seeming Well-Read” explicitly and literally engages with the healing purpose for middlebrow reading in the twenty-first

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57. Berthoud and Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, 389.

century. However, here the cure is for what the reader may not realize ails them. This entry seeks to heal readers' purpose for reading itself, taking them from social climber to intrinsically motivated and truly transformed individual. "The Ten Best Novels for Seeming Well-Read" may, in fact, assist readers in getting used to the stuff they ought to like as *Punch* said so long ago.

**"Sometimes effort is a fucking drag": Combatting the Outcomes of High-Stakes Assessment with *Practical Classics***

Although not explicitly bibliotherapeutic, Kevin Smokler's *Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven't Touched Since High School*, published by Prometheus Books in 2013, seeks to help readers heal relationships with the classics that were damaged by the circumstances of their high school educations. This is a new iteration of the middlebrow's longstanding overlap with the American educational system. Whereas Adler helps readers in the 1940s remediate their educations and Fadiman and Major expand middlebrow readers' understanding of the canon following shifts in education, Smokler takes a more inwardly-oriented approach, helping readers recover their interest in literature. Smokler's recommendations are organized thematically into ten parts: "youth and growing up," "identity," "the inner and the outer world," "love and pain," "working," "family," "ideas and learning," "violence and loss," "we the hero," and "the future."<sup>58</sup> While this is a book list book organized much like the other texts I address in this dissertation, Smokler conceives of it as an essay collection. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Smokler shares his writing process: he would read a book on his largely predetermined list, take some time to conduct some additional research on that

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58. Kevin Smokler, *Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven't Touched Since High School* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 2013), 5-7.

book, draft the essay, and send it to his editor before turning his attention to the next book.<sup>59</sup> Because Smokler's writing process was compartmentalized, each of the essays is a little different in terms of style and organization, though all of them include a brief plot summary and largely focus on the text's relevance to the adult reader's—as opposed to the high school reader's—life.

The *Practical Classics* cover art, designed by Prometheus graphic designer Jacqueline Nasso Cooke, is incredibly simple but reveals quite a bit about the text's stance on reading. The cover is largely white with the title and subtitle in large, all-caps, sans-serif font. Below the print are images of two chairs facing away from one another. On the left is a classroom desk chair that would be familiar to anyone who attended an American public school in the 1980s or 90s, as Smokler did. It has a hard, uncomfortable seat with a small, right-handed desk attached and a basket below. It is basic, utilitarian, and rather ugly, conjuring memories of rote learning in which students are not seen as individuals but as cogs in the education machine. On the right sits a casual and plain armchair that could have been found in a bookstore. It appears to be comfortable enough to sit in for a length of time, and perhaps even to curl up in with one's book and cat, but not so comfortable that one would be likely to fall asleep in it. There is no lamp or desk here, suggesting that this is a chair for pleasure reading, not for studying.<sup>60</sup> The armchair is far more inviting than the classroom desk and previews the inwardly-oriented and

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59. Carolyn Kellogg, "Prefer Not to? Kevin Smokler Says You Should Reread 'Bartleby,'" *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2013, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/19/entertainment/la-et-jc-prefer-not-to-kevin-smokler-says-you-should-reread-bartleby-20130218>.

60. For more on reading postures and brow, see Nicola Humble, "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading," *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 47-48, accessed February 10, 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/mod.2011.0004>

pleasurable approach that Smokler will advocate for throughout *Practical Classics*: a middlebrow mode of reading intended to heal the reader's relationship with the classics with mediation coming from a peer rather than an expert.

### High-Stakes Assessment in the English Classroom

Smokler opens the introduction to *Practical Classics* with a reflection on his own experience in high school English classes. In the first line, he admits, "I must have been a nightmare in high school English class."<sup>61</sup> He describes himself as a lifelong, enthusiastic reader for whom the educational setting ruined the pleasures of reading: "with the self-righteousness only an adolescent boy can invent, I saw these teachers as criminals who had stolen books I would have enjoyed beside a swimming pool or in a beanbag chair and turned them into something to be dissected, tested, essayed on, and graded."<sup>62</sup> Smokler loathed his high school English classes not because, like many students, he disliked reading but instead because he loved reading and felt that the formalized study of books disallowed the possibility of taking pleasure in reading. He goes on to describe a lingering resentment for the books he read in high school precisely because they are associated with the framework of assessment. *Practical Classics* is Smokler's attempt to disentangle the classics commonly read in high school classrooms from these complex and unpleasant feelings, helping readers to heal their relationship with classic literature. By describing an experience that many of his readers likely share, Smokler establishes himself as a fellow traveler rather than an expert. His mediation comes from a shared desire to muddle through the classics and once again find joy in reading them.

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61. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 11.

62. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 11.

Smokler's book implicitly responds to a shift in American public education, beginning in the 1990s and accelerating during the George W. Bush administration, that put much greater weight on high-stakes assessment. "High-stakes assessment" is an umbrella term used to describe assessments with substantial benefits or punishments for stakeholders including students, teachers, administrators, and schools. These outcomes may include the ability to graduate, rate of pay and funding, reputation, and employment status.<sup>63</sup> High-stakes assessment often takes the form of standardized testing, a type of assessment that had previously been used to place students in the appropriate level courses but, as of the late twentieth century, has been administered to nearly all students with high-stakes outcomes.<sup>64</sup> The use of high-stakes assessment has increased over the past several decades as a result of many factors, including increased government investment in education, media portrayal of a "crisis" in students' basic skills, and the lucrative industry that has developed around standardized testing and test preparation.<sup>65</sup> The stakes of high-stakes assessment became even higher in the wake of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which connected school funding to teachers' qualifications and students' test results.<sup>66</sup> While No Child Left Behind was intended to improve America's schools by increasing accountability, the standards were so rigid and the stakes so high

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63. James V. Hoffman et al., "High-Stakes Assessment in the Language Arts: The Piper Plays, the Players Dance, but Who Pays the Price?" in *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, ed. James Flood et al. (New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, 2003), 620.

64. Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), 1-2.

65. Hoffman et al., "High-Stakes Assessment," 620-22.

66. For a comprehensive discussion of No Child Left Behind and the increasing involvement of federal government in American education, see Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006).



that most schools were classified as failing by its standards.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the resulting shifts in education, with a focus on basic skills rather than critical thinking and indirect incentives to drive out struggling students, resulted in many students from already underserved populations falling behind or dropping out of school altogether. The high school English classroom setting was increasingly influenced by high-stakes assessment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, so even Smokler's readers who did not experience frequent high-stakes assessment firsthand would have a sense from media coverage that testing had become a major focus in the classroom.

When assessments have high stakes, both teachers and students feel the pressure to perform. Teachers have increasingly responded by adjusting their curricula to “teach to the test,” revising both the content and delivery of their instruction in an effort to boost students' standardized test scores.<sup>68</sup> Studies have found that when teachers are focused on standards and outcomes rather than genuine learning, they tend to be more controlling in the classroom and use fewer active learning strategies, meaning that students do not learn the content as well.<sup>69</sup> Teaching to the test may result in higher test scores, but those scores likely have little to do with student learning when the curriculum has been completely overcome by the test itself.<sup>70</sup> One study involving teacher interviews found that English teachers felt torn between their professional understanding of effective pedagogy and the need to prepare students for testing. Because the stakes were so high,

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67. Linda Darling-Hammond, “No Child Left Behind and High School Reform,” *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 654, accessed January 21, 2019, Education Database.

68. Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, 29.

69. Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, 26.

70. Hoffman et al., “High-Stakes Assessment,” 626.

teachers found themselves prioritizing test preparation over student engagement and teaching complex skills.<sup>71</sup> Students also feel these pressures. Alfie Kohn, outspoken critic of standardized testing, found that students in classrooms that emphasized achievement over learning considered learning to be an obligation, avoided challenging assignments and critical thinking, were ill-equipped to handle failure, and possessed fixed rather than growth mindsets.<sup>72</sup> Such outcomes are not surprising given the research on extrinsic motivation, which finds that even those who, like Smokler, were previously interested in a subject or activity will lose interest when it is undertaken primarily to avoid punishment or seek a reward.<sup>73</sup> High-stakes assessment is grounded in extrinsic motivational factors for both teachers and students, leading to subpar classroom performance from both.

Smokler believes he was a “nightmare” in high school English classes because the conditions of the classroom—discussions, presentations, papers, and examinations—stripped away the joy that he had previously associated with reading. Smokler, and likely many of his readers, attended high school during the rise of high-stakes assessment in the late twentieth century. He would have participated in some standardized tests, though not nearly so many as his younger readers who came of age in the era of No Child Left Behind. Smokler is a case study in the damaging effects of using extrinsic factors to motivate students: he had previously loved reading but was so put off by the graded elements of reading for class that he set aside pleasure reading for many years in an

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71. Suzanne M. Miller, “Conversations from the Commissions: Reflective Teaching in the Panic of High-Stakes Testing,” *English Education* 34, no. 2 (January 2002): 166-67, accessed January 20, 2019, JSTOR.

72. Alfie Kohn, “The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement,” in *Defending Public Schools*, ed. Sandra Mathison and E. Wayne Ross (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 30-32.

73. Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, 22.

attempt to shield himself. For Smokler, the high school English classroom had lasting, damaging effects, and *Practical Classics* is an attempt to recover his love of reading and discover the relevance of the classics to his adult life.

#### Smokler's Audience of Adult Readers

Smokler uses the first-person plural point of view to construct an insider group of readers who share this fraught history with education throughout the introduction. After admitting to the less desirable traits of his high school self, Smokler refers to “those of *us* who love the simple act of reading,”<sup>74</sup> placing himself on the same level as his reader. He doesn't position himself as an expert but instead as a fellow passionate reader. He goes on to describe his intended reader as “someone who loves to have worlds opened by books but...also has very real demands on their time—jobs, families, mortgages, and health.”<sup>75</sup> This reader, like Smokler himself, loves reading and was likely enthusiastic about reading as an adolescent but may not have gotten everything they could have out of the classics as a high school student. Smokler's mediation from alongside, rather than above, his reader is enabled by the twenty-first-century flattening of authority that brings together producers and consumers. His recommendations are, of course, inflected by his own subjectivity as an educated white man, but his selections, which I will discuss later in the chapter, indicate that he has women and readers of color in mind as members of his audience as well. Smokler's peer mediation demonstrates the possibility of recovery from a damaging education through middlebrow reading practices.

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74. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 12, emphasis mine.

75. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 12.

Smokler developed *Practical Classics* in collaboration with his audience, using interactive social media technology. In addition to blogging about his writing process on his homepage, Smokler also invited readers to subscribe to an email newsletter that allowed them to provide feedback on his book while he was writing it. In a YouTube video announcing the upcoming publication of *Practical Classics*, Smokler reflects upon the value of connecting with a niche intended audience in this way. He argues that publishing, and content creation more broadly, can be more successful when creators have a small, dedicated audience that rallies around them, proving the worth of the product and providing an audience that cares (and, of course, will financially support that product). Because it brings producers and consumers together, the internet allows this engagement to take place despite Smokler's tight book deadline, resulting in a book list book that is more capable of providing mediation that will help readers heal their relationship with the classics because the listmaker has consulted with that audience to determine what they actually want and need. This framing also shows how Smokler collapses the distance between himself as a cultural authority and his readers.

Smokler continued to engage with his audience once the book was available, extending his peer mediation beyond the confines of the book itself. After publication in early 2013, Smokler undertook a ten-month book tour in which he visited bookstores in sixteen cities.<sup>76</sup> In fact, my own copy of *Practical Classics*, which I purchased secondhand, is signed by Smokler and dated March 11, 2013, so it is likely an artifact of the book tour. Smokler also appeared in public radio interviews. As a guest on National

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76. Kevin Smokler, "Practical Classics Tour Wrap Up," *Kevin Smokler* (blog), December 13, 2013, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.kevinsmokler.com/2013/12/practical-classics-tour-wrap-up-.html#sthash.DFhQ8sa0.sT4Sgrwi.dpbs>.

Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* program, he took calls, tweets, and emails from listeners who had reread books that they were initially exposed to in high school.<sup>77</sup> To promote *Practical Classics*, Smokler turns to bookstores and public radio, both of which attract those already interested in mediated, purposeful reading. *Practical Classics* is not intended to convince anyone of the pleasures of reading. Rather, Smokler's introduction and publicity indicate that his book is for those who already value reading despite their damaging educational experiences and want to rehabilitate their relationship with the classics.

Healing this relationship is possible for adult readers, Smokler argues, precisely because they no longer have grades hanging over their reading. One book reviewer notes the centrality of this shift in purpose:

Putting literature to practical use is not a new invention, but what's refreshing about the practice in this light is how Smokler pits this sort of practical gifting-as-guidance against the reduction of literature to "a letter grade and a dusty old obligation." Read for pleasure. Read for edification. Read for practical purposes. But do not read for an A+.<sup>78</sup>

While high school students must read the classics to earn a good grade on whatever assessment they are expected to undertake, adults are free from this burden. As a result, adult readers are ready and able to experience joy while reading the classics. Because Smokler has focused his list on books that are, were, or might have been read in high school English classes, the recommended reading list is essentially the same, but

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77. Kevin Smokler, interview by Neal Conan, "Rereading The Classics: Lessons Learned The Second Time Around," *NPR Talk of the Nation*, January 17, 2013, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2013/01/17/169627528/rereading-the-classics-lessons-learned-the-second-time-around>.

78. Brandon Bye, "Practical Classics: 50 Reasons to Reread 50 Books You Haven't Touched Since High School," by Kevin Smokler," *Fiction Writers Review* (blog), February 21, 2013, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://fictionwritersreview.com/review/practical-classics-50-reasons-to-reread-50-books-you-havent-touched-since-high-school-by-kevin-smokler/>.

everything else has changed: readers read these same classics at a different stage in life and for different purposes than they did as high schoolers. For *Practical Classics* readers, the goal isn't to be educated or well-read, as it is for some other book lists that serve as alternatives to the high-stakes assessment context of mainstream education such as Susan Wise Bauer's *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had* and Jane Mallison's *Book Smart: Your Essential Reading List for Becoming a Literary Genius in 365 Days*.<sup>79</sup> Instead, Smokler resists the culture of high-stakes assessment by assuring readers that it's okay to come back to the classics. Smokler's twenty-first century readers don't need to read them following Adler's threefold method, to expand their worldview, or even for any specific kind of comprehension, but they can still read with a healing purpose relevant to their adult lives in the twenty-first century.

The essay on William Shakespeare encapsulates the distinction Smokler makes between high school and adult reading. In it, Smokler acknowledges that most reasons for reading Shakespeare's work sound a lot like those for eating vegetables and that many readers are likely to feel overwhelmed when approaching Shakespeare, but he encourages readers to read him anyway. He suggests a few reading strategies that might be considered shortcuts in the high school classroom: start by rereading plays and sonnets that one already has some familiarity with, supplement one's reading with online summaries, read with friends, and watch the plays rather than reading them.<sup>80</sup> Smokler's central argument in this essay is that there is no wrong way to read Shakespeare. Shakespeare's work is so rich, Smokler writes, that readers should determine what about

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79. Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003); Mallison, *Book Smart*.

80. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 205-8.

it they find significant and look for that. He challenges the high-mindedness associated with Shakespeare by encouraging his reader not to “think for a second there’s something you’re supposed to be “getting” out of reading Shakespeare and that you’re the slow-wit for not knowing what it is....It should bring you joy first and foremost.”<sup>81</sup> Smokler embraces a diverse audience through this approach, encouraging readers to take from Shakespeare whatever they find relevant and not feel like they have to approach Shakespeare in one “right” way. Smokler suggests that any reading of Shakespeare will result in some sort of benefit, even if that benefit could not be expressed on a final exam. Smokler’s mediation gives readers permission to forget the assessment of their high school years and instead read for their own joy in order to rediscover Shakespeare and, more broadly, the classics.

#### Smokler’s List

Despite using the term in the title and throughout *Practical Classics*, Smokler avoids explicitly defining the term “classics,” a move that is problematic after the important work that was done to address cultural categories during the culture wars. In the introduction, he writes, “I know the canonical books of high school are called “classics” for a reason, and it’s not because some scold on Sunday morning TV or a secret cabal of English teachers declared them so.”<sup>82</sup> Here, Smokler uses loaded language to mention some common reasons why people often assume that some books are designated classics

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81. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 208-9. Of course, as Lawrence W. Levine explains in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), Shakespeare was not always regarded as a lofty author. In some ways, Smokler’s call to read Shakespeare for the joy of it rather than comprehension is a return to the nineteenth-century Shakespeare for the masses.

82. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 12.

with an emphasis on determination from on high and indicates that he now knows better. From his position as a book listmaker and mediator alongside his readers, Smokler uses the classics to take back power as a form of resisting the damaging educational system that developed from high-stakes assessment and repairing readers' understanding of and relationship with classic literature.

Even though he says that some books “are called ‘classics’ for a reason,” Smokler never explains his own basis for evaluation, a choice that is problematic given post-culture wars concerns with canon formation and representation. Smokler hints at some of his criteria in his Shakespeare essay, where he writes about the importance of endurance: “at some point, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ recedes before ‘remembered.’ Longevity is the great judge.”<sup>83</sup> This passage suggests that a text's classical status has to do with its ability to continue providing something to its readers many years after its publication, to speak to audiences beyond those of its author's time. Smokler is not alone in considering endurance to be the central criteria for canonicity—Samuel Johnson defines artistic excellence as persistence because works that have persisted have had their quality confirmed time and again<sup>84</sup>—but Smokler's view of endurance is oversimplified. It does not account for the many reasons besides an inherent greatness that a work may endure or even be published and read in the first place. Smokler doesn't recognize that the reason that the works by women and writers of color that he includes in his book list book are now called classics is because of the hard work done earlier in the twentieth century to increase representation in the literary canon. This is one tradeoff in the shifting landscape

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83. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 206.

84. Samuel Johnson, from “Preface to Shakespeare” (1765), in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, rev. ed., ed. Hazard Adams (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 320-2.



of authority in the twenty-first century. While mediation from a peer may be welcome in terms of modeling the reading practices of non-professional readers, a reader outside of the academy like Smokler also may not be steeped in the debates surrounding literature and the literary canon. This is not to say that one type of mediator is better than another but rather that their differences will impact their mediation.

The list of fifty titles in *Practical Classics* is cobbled together from several sources for a representative list of texts that would have been assigned in recent decades, making sure to also include texts by women, texts by writers of color, and genres beyond the literary novel. Smokler contacted his own high school English teachers for their syllabi and used them alongside lists associated with Advanced Placement English examinations, the 1999 edition of Fadiman and Major's *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, and Harold Bloom's 2002 *How to Read and Why*.<sup>85</sup> The nature of his source material results in his selections largely reflecting the landscape of high-stakes assessment, including texts that would be read for standardized English assessments and Advanced Placement examinations. As readers encounter these texts once more, this time without the stresses of formal evaluation, they are able to find a relevance that may have been lost when reading for the test the first time around, thereby healing their relationship with reading along the way.

Smokler further contributes to his readers' healing through the types of texts he chooses to highlight as well as the length of the list itself. The list is far from comprehensive, containing only fifty titles and amounting to one of the shortest book lists that I examined for this project. Smokler had only ten months to read for and draft

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85. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 14.

*Practical Classics*, so, like his middlebrow reader, he had to be intentional about making the best use of his reading time, omitting long and complex texts that might otherwise be considered classics.<sup>86</sup> The list skews heavily toward narrative fiction, though it also includes essays, autobiography, and a small amount of poetry. Unlike Adler or Fadiman, whose lists include a great deal of philosophy and poetry, Smokler emphasizes genres that middlebrow readers are already likely to prefer and that they may more easily find relevant, engaging them with more familiar types of literature as they begin the process of renewing their relationships with the classics.

Smokler attempts to use his *Practical Classics* list to challenge the borders of the literary canon, but these attempts are limited by his own identity and high school experience. In the introduction, he writes,

Sprinkled throughout *Practical Classics* are essays on kinds of books that were not assigned to me in high school but that I hope are assigned now. We are far too attached to the moldy idea that only certain kinds of literature are worthy of being studied by teenagers.<sup>87</sup>

When Smokler introduces these new classics, he does so partially in relation to the authors' identities. One-third of the texts in *Practical Classics* were written by women, and nearly one-fifth of them were written by people of color, including Black, Asian and Asian American, African, Indigenous American, and Latinx authors. Given the brevity of the *Practical Classics* list and the history of book list books' dominance by white male writers, this list represents substantial diversity in the era following the culture wars. Smokler also introduces new classics in regard to the genre of the works, taking a step beyond the culture wars by including a graphic novel, a children's novel, and genre

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86. Kellogg, "Prefer Not to?"

87. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 15.

fiction. Overall, though, the majority of the list reflects the traditional literary canon. An article published in *The English Journal* in 1992, the year after Smokler himself graduated from high school, reported that “alternative” literatures were slow to take hold in high school curricula because the teachers themselves lacked experience with them and because the “great works of the Western tradition” were less likely to provoke negative community reactions.<sup>88</sup> Even those high school teachers who did recognize the shortcomings of the literary canon following the culture wars had competing interests that influenced what made it onto their reading lists. In selecting the titles for his list, Smokler likely grappled with the same issues that his high school teachers did, trying to include previously marginalized voices in a reading list while simultaneously representing a literary tradition.

Because *Practical Classics* draws largely upon the Western canon, it includes many texts that readers are likely to find intimidating because of their reputations. Smokler’s mediation of these texts promotes readers’ rejuvenation by telling readers that it is okay to read challenging texts for fun, and it is also okay to read challenging texts without fully comprehending them. In his essay on Toni Morrison’s work, Smokler begins by outlining everything about Morrison that makes readers feel that her work might be intimidating: her stately appearance, her many awards including the Nobel Prize in Literature, the extent to which her work is studied, and the sense that “you could come back a dozen times and still feel as though you missed something. Nine pages into just about any Morrison novel, and you already feel like you’ve missed something.”<sup>89</sup> The

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88. Arthur N. Applebee, “Stability and Change in the High-School Canon,” *The English Journal* 81, no. 5 (September 1992): 31, accessed January 20, 2019, JSTOR.

89. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 162.

issue of “getting it” was also important for Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King in the *Oprah’s Book Club* episode on Morrison’s *Paradise*, in which Morrison pushed back against the reader’s need to “get it.”<sup>90</sup> Here again, Smokler positions himself alongside his middlebrow readers, sharing their anxiety in approaching great authors at the same time as he helps them navigate these anxieties.

It might seem more natural to discuss intimidating authors in the essay on Shakespeare. However, many readers are comfortable admitting that they struggle with Shakespeare due to difficulty understanding the language, history, and genre of his plays. In contrast, Morrison writes novels and was still alive and writing when Smokler developed *Practical Classics*, so readers cannot point to the same reasons for their confusion when reading her work. They may feel like they should be able to understand Morrison’s novels and will likely become frustrated when, like Smokler, they are confused after only the first nine pages. By using Morrison as an example of an intimidating author, Smokler’s mediation grants readers permission to feel confused by work they believe they should understand and encourages them to read it anyway, just as he has done. Furthermore, by upholding a Black, female author as an example of complexity, sophistication, and ambiguity, Smokler upends the white supremacist notion, already challenged by the culture wars, that only texts written by white men are valuable and merit rereading. Even so, Smokler’s discussion of Morrison’s work only briefly acknowledges the significant role of race, instead focusing on the importance of family in her novels. In doing so, he interestingly invites all readers, regardless of their own race, to identify with Morrison’s characters. Something similar happened in Oprah’s episode

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90. Aubry, “Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow,” 354-55.

on *The Bluest Eye* when, even though race was part of the discussion, white women in the audience revealed how they were able to identify with Pecola's dissatisfaction with her appearance.<sup>91</sup> This is one potential danger of the post-culture wars middlebrow. While reading works by writers from diverse backgrounds is an improvement, middlebrow readers' desire to find the ways in which what they read is relevant to their own lives can potentially overshadow the need to confront systemic inequalities.

In the introduction, Smokler argues that "it *would* be a crime to miss out on great books entirely because they cast too intimidating a shadow or remind us of who we used to be."<sup>92</sup> It is not until the Morrison essay over halfway into *Practical Classics* that Smokler offers some strategies for reading texts by intimidating authors. Readers have a choice between two options, Smokler writes. They can either dive into the author's most challenging work with abandon, or they can begin with the author's most accessible text and gradually work up to their most challenging.<sup>93</sup> Smokler doesn't suggest that one approach is better than another but rather asks readers to consider their own tendencies when choosing a strategy. Readers are empowered by Smokler's mediation to use a middlebrow mode of reading for their own purposes and enjoyment, taking ownership over their reading in a way that the classroom does not encourage.

### The Practicality of the Classics

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91. Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow," 360.

92. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 16.

93. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 163.

In *Practical Classics*, Smokler argues that the classics are relevant to adult readers in a way that they weren't when those same readers were in high school. He closes the introduction with this sentiment: "let us enjoy these books now, not just because they are great, not just because they are useful, but because we are now in a position to enjoy them much, much more. They haven't changed. We have. We are ready for them."<sup>94</sup> It's not that reading the classics in high school was wrong or that students can't gain anything at all from reading the classics during their teenage years and in an educational context. However, reading these texts as teenagers allows for only a limited understanding of them. When readers return to the classics as adults, they are better prepared to hear what these texts have to say and to take something from them because adult readers have the life experience to more fully understand the classics. In preparation for a review of *Practical Classics* on the *Fiction Writers Review* blog, Brandon Bye tested this argument by rereading "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," a short story by Sherman Alexie that he had first encountered as a high school student. He, like Smokler, found merit in returning to the text as an adult: "yes, I've changed, I'm perhaps more ready for it now; but so too has the world changed around me, and for that reason, as well, these texts will never be finished saying what they have to say."<sup>95</sup> By encouraging readers to reread the books they read in high school, Smokler reclassifies the texts themselves from high school books to true classics intended to be revisited again and again. In the introduction, he asks, "if a great book has run the gauntlet of time, shouldn't it also point us toward how to lead a great life?"<sup>96</sup> When books "point us toward how to lead a great life," readers not

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94. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 16.

95. Bye, "Practical Classics."

96. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 13.

only heal their relationship with reading and the classics but also continue to improve themselves in that inwardly-oriented pursuit of happiness that characterizes twenty-first-century life.

The question of whether reading a book one dislikes will contribute to leading a great life arises in the chapter “*The Scarlet Letter*: I Don’t Like It Either.” Smokler’s stance on Hawthorne’s novel is that he did not like it in high school, he does not like it upon revisiting it, and he thinks that other books achieve the same purpose while being more enjoyable to read. Despite all of this, *The Scarlet Letter* appears as a recommendation in *Practical Classics*, functioning as a placeholder for whichever books readers find too unappealing to read. Smokler suggests that readers take on a book like this for every ten appealing books that they read, writing, “they aren’t there to be our friends, which is okay. Not every book worth picking up must be.”<sup>97</sup> Here, nearly a century later, is another illustration of *Punch* magazine’s middlebrow definition. While Smokler does not suggest that his readers need to get used to the books they ought to like, he does think that readers should read them anyway because they are good for them. However, he takes the middle ground, falling somewhere between Adler’s “read only the best books” and the permissive “read whatever you like.” Smokler encourages readers to give the classics another chance, choosing those that may be relevant to their personal experiences so that they can benefit from them. As a peer mediator, Smokler models reading the occasional unappealing book as a means to shifting one’s approach to reading overall.

While a sense of urgency underlies most other book list books, *Practical Classics* instead tells readers that they have plenty of time. There is, of course, a tradeoff here in

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97. Smokler, *Practical Classics*, 125.

that readers will read fewer books over the course of their lifetimes, but Smokler, like Adler and Fadiman, argues that reading deeply and well is better than reading widely, though of course Smokler advocates for pleasurable reading rather than thorough comprehension.<sup>98</sup> In an article written for *Book Riot*, a literary culture website, following the publication of *Practical Classics*, Smokler criticizes contemporary list culture for creating a false sense of urgency around cultural consumption. Although readers know they will never be able to read everything they would like, lists (including that of *Practical Classics*) lead readers to believe that they may someday finish their reading list, though surely that list will only grow longer. This, Smokler argues, is a good thing because readers will never run out of good books to read. Rather than read with a sense of urgency set to match the endless reading lists available to twenty-first-century readers, Smokler encourages readers to slow down and enjoy what they read. Throughout both the *Book Riot* article and an interview for *The Atlantic Wire*, Smokler continually returns to a refrain: “we have more time than we think.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, this sentiment is reflected in *Practical Classic*’s subtitle, which encourages readers not to read the classics but to *reread* them. In addition to choosing reading materials carefully, readers should also take the time to read well, enjoy their reading, and reread in order to achieve the personal gains the classics have to offer. Adult readers are free from the pressures and timelines of high school assessment and can take the time to heal themselves through middlebrow reading practices.

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98. Kevin Smokler, “What Re-Reading 50 Books in a Hurry Taught Me About Reading Slowly,” *Book Riot* (blog), March 11, 2013, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://bookriot.com/2013/03/11/what-re-reading-50-books-in-a-hurry-taught-me-about-reading-slowly/>.

99. Smokler, “Re-Reading 50 Books in a Hurry”; Jen Doll, “The Case for Rereading the High-School Classics,” *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2013, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/03/case-rereading-high-school-classics/317850/>.



## Book List Books and the Middlebrow Mode of Reading

The American middlebrow has always been tied up with the issue of making the most of the time one has. However, it is not the watered down version of high culture that Woolf, Macdonald, and other critics once argued it was. When we refuse to accept those critiques at face value and instead take a closer look at middlebrow culture, we can see its depth. Understanding the middlebrow exclusively as a classifier for people and objects risks preserving the now outdated stigma of the middlebrow. Since its inception, middlebrow scholarship has argued that the middlebrow matters, that it is worthy of study, and that it can be taken seriously. In order to continue taking it seriously, we need to conceive of it as not only or always located in people or objects but as also a mode that can be engaged or disengaged across individuals and cultural objects. The middlebrow has always seemed to resist definition, resulting in definitions that often focus on what the middlebrow is not rather than what it is.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps that is because we were not looking for the middlebrow in all of the right places. In proposing an expanded definition of the middlebrow that also identifies the literary middlebrow as a purposeful, mediated mode of reading, I hope to have uncovered a bit more of what the middlebrow *is*.

While a middlebrow mode of reading involves substantial mediation, the nature of that mediation—as well as who is doing the mediating—evolved over the course of the twentieth century. When Sir John Lubbock first delivered his “Hundred Best” from the pulpit of the Working Men’s College, he did so as its president and a well-respected Member of Parliament. Mortimer Adler was an outspoken college professor, and Clifton Fadiman was an editor and radio personality. Each of these early book listmakers had

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100. Botshon and Goldsmith, *Middlebrow Moderns*, 3.

institutional clout, Lubbock and Adler through their educational affiliations, and Fadiman as a well-known middlebrow personality. As the twentieth century made way for the twenty-first, readers were able to access media and each other like never before, resulting in a flattening of authority that allowed higher education and publishing outsiders like Smokler, Berthoud, and Elderkin to develop book list books. Increasingly, readers have wanted book recommendations from readers who read like they do rather than professional readers. Whereas Adler's mediation instructed readers on the correct way to squeeze every ounce of meaning from a text, his contemporary counterparts instead focus on how texts are relevant to readers' lives.

Likewise, the purposes for engaging in middlebrow reading practices have also shifted. Earlier book list books closely linked middlebrow reading practices to values in higher education. Adler's readers were promised the opportunity to gain a liberal education—which perhaps they could not access or did not feel they achieved despite going to college—and its associated cultural capital on their own. Fadiman's readers had their lifetime reading plans adjusted over the course of his two major editions to reflect changing feminist and multicultural values in relation to the literary canon. By the time Smokler composed his list, however, many middlebrow readers felt disenfranchised by the educational system, whose high-stakes assessment damaged their relationship with reading. But the educational system is not the only thing that is broken: in the early twenty-first century, it seems that everything has gone wrong. In this contemporary moment, mediators offer middlebrow reading practices as a means to, in Berthoud and Elderkin's words, "cure what ails you." The common thread here is not only that middlebrow reading is purposeful, but that it is done for self-improvement and even self-

transformation. In the early twentieth century, this meant reading for the outwardly oriented purpose of gaining cultural capital, whereas over time readers have become more interested in how what they read is relevant to their own lives. In any case, middlebrow readers read to become better versions of themselves.

Book lists are sometimes criticized as no more than a series of check boxes, but they are so much more than that. They are an embodiment of desire, ambition, and a purposeful journey towards an ideal self. They are meaningful to readers who, like Fadiman recommends, use them to guide a lifetime's reading. For that, they're worthy of study. Book list books also offer an opportunity to look at the idealized reading practices of nonprofessional readers outside the classroom. We have too few artifacts of historical reading practices. Book list books provide untapped possibilities to better understand historical readers. My project has only begun to investigate book list books. There are many more available to provide rich subject matter for historians of reading and the middlebrow. It's hard to know how long the publishing industry will invest in book lists published as hard copy books—fewer book list books were published in 2009, after the recession hit, than in surrounding years, so a similar dip may be forthcoming in this recession—but the book list will live on. In 2020, as I concluded this project, countless new book lists circulated around the internet to help readers cope with stay at home orders during the coronavirus pandemic and engage in antiracism when another wave of police killings of Black Americans spurred protests and calls to dismantle systemic racism. Even before that, multimodal projects like PBS's 2018 *Great American Read* used television, a print book list book, and an online community to bring American readers together over their favorite novels, and books like the 2018 *Well-Read Black Girl*

book list book and associated community have explicitly addressed the black women readers that were previously disregarded by middlebrow cultural authorities. The book list will continue to take on the challenges of each generation by providing a medium for middlebrow mediation and purposeful reading.

In this time of anti-intellectualism, division, and even apathy, the middlebrow has become more important than ever. The middlebrow has frequently been critiqued for its middleness: it exists in a space of both commerce *and* culture; highbrow *and* accessible. Although this middleness may be uncomfortable for those who desire to neatly categorize their world, the messiness of the middlebrow is also what gives it its power. The middlebrow is able to reach a wide audience precisely because of its in-betweenness, and this has exciting possibilities in the twenty-first century. Online spaces bring readers together to explore the relevance of literature to their lives with one another, amplifying the work that was done through the great books discussion groups earlier in the twentieth century. Because readers can come together over shared interests from geographically diverse areas, and because this moment in history feels so urgent in so many ways, the middlebrow, with new cultural mediators as guides and new purposes for reading, may be precisely what is needed to create social change.

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