

## Book Futures: Reading, Writing, and Publishing in the Age of the Internet

Ted Striphas, **The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 272 pp., \$18.50 (paperback), \$8.99 (Kindle).

Jim Collins, **Bring On the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 300 pp., \$23.95 (paperback), \$13.77 (Kindle).

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*Reading at Risk*, a 2004 report from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), famously put forward a “detailed but bleak assessment of the decline of reading’s role in the nation’s culture,” presenting compelling survey data indicating that “. . . For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading” (p. vii). The conclusions drawn by the report underscore the conventional wisdom about the contemporary media landscape: The decline in reading uncovered is not just a value-neutral shift in forms of information consumption, but rather “an imminent cultural crisis” (p. xiii), given the connections the report draws between literary reading and forms of active citizenship vital to a thriving democracy. While the report is careful to stipulate that “no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading,” it nonetheless argues powerfully for the role of various forms of electronic media (including television, video games, and the Internet) in contributing to the decline, as “the cumulative presence and availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading” (p. xii).

In any case, such is the conventional wisdom, which the NEA revisited and reaffirmed in its 2007 follow-up report, *To Read or Not to Read*. But right alongside such apparently overwhelming evidence of reading’s decline in American life, one might notice signs of the proliferation of literary culture: the spread of big-box bookstores, the rise of online booksellers, the increasing number of reading devices and their platforms and services. Book culture remains, in other words, an expanding market, if one whose forms are changing in ways that might make it more difficult to recognize and understand. Even the NEA at last began to recognize this diffusion of forms that the literary has taken in contemporary American life when, in its 2009 update, *Reading on the Rise*, the agency acknowledged that a great deal of reading is taking place online, even if it stopped well short of admitting that digital reading is of equal value to that of books.

Coming nearly a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and 15 years into the Internet’s popularization, this extremely belated acknowledgment reveals something of the degree to which mainstream literary culture—under which umbrella I include not only major arts organizations like the NEA, but other entities such as publishing houses, booksellers, many successful authors, and a huge percentage of critics and scholars—has failed to account for the shifting forms, locations, and modes of the literary in the

contemporary United States. That the literary continues to be important can be seen in the NEA's own report, which raises but fails to account for one curious bit of data:

Contrary to the overall decline in literary reading, the number of people doing creative writing—of any genre, not exclusively literary works—increased substantially between 1982 and 2002. In 1982, about 11 million people did some form of creative writing. By 2002, this number had risen to almost 15 million people (18 or older), an increase of about 30 percent. (*Reading at Risk*, p. 22)

The report's inability to make sense of this curious increase in writing might give one cause to reconsider the terms under which the study was conducted. That crucial caveat in the definition of creative writing—"of any genre, not exclusively literary works"—indicates an openness that the NEA did not bring to its sense of what *reading* is: engaging with book-length printed and bound fiction and poetry for no purpose other than pleasure. This mode of committed reading does of course still exist, but it represents only one of a myriad of forms that literary engagement takes today. As a result of its singular focus on the centuries-old form of the book, the NEA reports missed an opportunity to understand the shifting roles of reading in contemporary culture.

Two recent books—Ted Striphas' *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* and Jim Collins' *Bring On the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*—serve as important correctives to reports such as these, providing new means of thinking about the ways in which the modes of production and consumption of literary culture are changing in response to new technological formations, new corporate structures, and new media convergences. Each explores the phenomena that the NEA misses, creating a far richer understanding of the places of books and reading in the early 21st century.

Striphas' *The Late Age of Print* signals in its title a decidedly Jamesonian approach to understanding the belatedness of the book, a state that, as in the late age of capital, signals not demise, but complication. The late age of print is, as the volume's introduction makes clear, by no means the *end* of print. The recent cultural formations Striphas explores represent both break and continuity with what has gone before, and the systems that produce our culture have become so complex as to require careful attention to mapping their structures and movements and our places and roles in them. Countering the conventional wisdom surrounding the demise of the book, Striphas insists that though our relationship to the literary is undoubtedly changing in the contemporary environment, we cannot ignore "the enduring role of books in shaping habits of thought, conduct, and expression" (Striphas, p. 3). These changes, he notes, cannot simply be laid at the feet of shifts in individual behavior, but rather must be understood as an effect of the ways that

the social, economic, and material coordinates of books have been changing in relation to other media, denser forms of industrial organization, shifting patterns of work and



leisure, new laws governing commodity ownership and use, and a host of other factors.  
(ibid.)

Key within this investigation is a shift away from the conventional understanding, as seen in the NEA reports, of the book as a sacred object that has been debased and commodified by contemporary consumer culture, instead positioning it as one of the primary means through which that consumer culture has been created and perpetuated. Striphas therefore explores the role that books have played in creating what he calls, echoing Henri Lefebvre, a "society of controlled consumption" (p. 5).

Striphas begins his exploration of these changes with what seems to many like their endpoint: e-books and the apparent threat that new digital forms of textuality pose not just to the physical form of the printed book, but also to the content that it has for centuries conveyed. Striphas argues against the assumption that these changes threaten the book's continued existence through an examination of a number of historical analogues; concerns about the role of typewriting in mechanizing the writing process, for instance, bear an important correspondence with contemporary concerns about the role of devices in mechanizing the reading process. Where the e-book does present a challenge to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century reader's perceived relationship to the book, however, arises in that relationship as a form of consumer exchange: The digitization of the text brings to the surface long-simmering tensions surrounding the ownership of books. As Striphas notes, much work was done in the 20th century by the publishing industry to convert book borrowers into book owners, and to make such ownership into a core cultural value. Today, however, technological and legal pressures are working to transform book owners into e-book *licensors*, fundamentally changing the relationship between the consumer and the cultural artifact:

Given that most of today's most popular, commercially available e-book technologies allow cultural producers to micromanage the persistence, use, and circulation of content, these technologies are symptomatic of—indeed, further—the tense and uneven process of transforming three core principles of consumer capitalism: the belief that the widespread private ownership and accumulation of mass-produced consumer goods is desirable from the standpoint of capitalist production; the assumption that the sale of a certain item implies the more or less complete transfer of ownership rights to that item; and the principle that commodity ownership consists, in part, in the right to make use of the goods you've purchased with minimal—and, ideally no—outside interference by the party from whom you've purchased them. (p. 45)

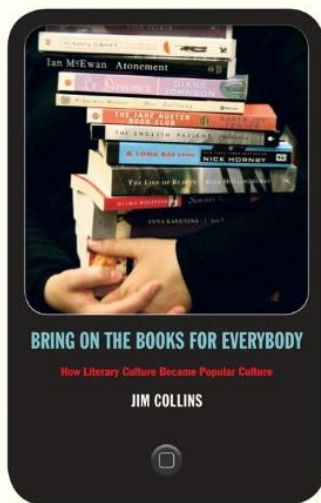
Striphas goes on to explore this transformation in the core principles of consumer capitalism from a culture of ownership into one of "controlled consumption" by exploring the material histories of the big-box bookstore, the networked just-in-time online bookseller, the televised book club, the piracy-prevention mechanisms associated with big book franchises, and other contemporary book-related phenomena. In each case, he explores what the conventional wisdom about these formations misses. Big-box bookstores, for instance, are assumed to be destroyers of local, independent stores, but by looking closely at the development of one particular such store, Striphas uncovers race- and class-based disparities in the resistance communities are able to display toward megastores. Similarly, while many have written about the genius of Amazon's distribution system, those descriptions have failed to examine

the specific histories of the mechanisms (like the ISBN and the bar code) and the labor relations that make such a massively automated distribution system possible, all of which reveal a society increasingly productive not of goods but of *control*.

In my opinion, it is *The Late Age of Print's* chapter on Oprah's Book Club that features Striphas at his best, despite that chapter's sometimes uneasy fit with the book's overall argument about controlled consumption. Rather than a simplistic understanding of the media empire as a contributor to the increasing transformation of the book into a commodity—which his earlier chapters convincingly demonstrate—or a too-easy focus on the book club as a form of corporate manipulation of consumer practices, Striphas instead explores the ways that the show's engagement with and concern for its viewers' everyday lives served to inspire more committed readers:

The club's success and appeal aren't mere symptoms of the triumph of sentimentality in the book world, much less that of pop psychology; nor are they evidence of the "dumbing down" of American culture, a claim Todd Gitlin has levied against trade fiction in general. The popularity of Oprah's Book Club underscores the fact that readers might well be buying books in larger quantities if only authors, publishers, critics, and booksellers communicated more effectively not only in terms of highlighting specific titles but also in achieving a better fit with readers' experiences, needs, and daily routines. (p. 133)

While there are unquestionably concerns to be raised about the book club's focus on personal self-improvement rather than collective engagement with social issues—a focus that might have helped more closely tie the chapter into the book's overall argument about controlled consumption—Striphas convincingly demonstrates that the show's concern with the ways that readers actually read, with the personal investments that consumers make in books, is one that conventional literary culture ignores to its own detriment.



For his part, Jim Collins, in *Bring On the Books for Everybody*, focuses on the shifting manifestations of that conventional literary culture and its pleasures in an age of media convergence. The title of the book comes, perhaps not surprisingly, from a gleeful exclamation by Oprah herself as copies of the next title in her book club were distributed to members of the audience. That point of origin for the phrase—an exclamation that, in the show's context, appears to be less about the pleasures of reading than about the pleasures of receiving a gift—suggests Collins' ambivalent approach to the new literary culture. On the one hand, he takes the ways that contemporary readers find pleasure in the literary seriously, and thus understands the popularization of venues in which this pleasure might be found—that books are now for everybody—as a blow against the elitist tendencies of traditional literary culture. On the other hand, he simultaneously raises concerns about the deepening relationship between self-definition and consumerism that this popularization of literary pleasure brings in its wake, strongly suggesting that the apparent

freedom to define the self through public expressions of “taste” are guided more by effective marketing than anything else.

Collins builds this profoundly cultural studies-influenced argument about the literary by focusing on the new *places* that it inhabits in contemporary popular culture; he tracks literary pleasure as it moves out of the restricted spaces associated with a kind of cultural inheritance once restricted to the aristocracy (and with which the middle classes were forever using processes of formal education in an effort to catch up) and into the demotic spaces of self-improvement: suburban big-box and online bookstores, in-person and televised book clubs, and, of course, movie theaters. In the course of following this movement, Collins discovers that the pleasures of books can now exist *only* outside the spaces inhabited by the keepers of literary culture:

Popular literary culture, in a variety of new incarnations, now appears to be everywhere you look—at the multiplex, driving down the strip, floating through the mall, or surfing the Net. And over the course of those twenty years [between 1980 and 2000], those early Christians—the professors of literature—ran amuck, allegedly refusing to hold up their end of the conversation as they spoke in High Theory and killed off authors on a regular basis before some returned, eager to connect with addicted readers, who congregated enthusiastically online and on television, to share fiercely held opinions about books. Apparently, the love of literature can now be fully experienced only outside the academy and the New York literary scene, out there somewhere in the wilds of popular culture. (p. 3)

This is something a good bit more than Striplhas’ contention that literary culture should pay more attention to everyday readers, instead laying the blame for whatever has become of the literary—whatever popular cultural values its pleasures now support—squarely at the feet of those who were most bound to support it.

And what has become of the literary? Collins, like Striplhas, adopts something of a Jamesonian position with respect to the current state of book culture in the U.S., though where Striplhas focuses on the political economy of late print, Collins explores the ramifications of the postmodern collapse in distinctions between “high” and “low” culture. In Hollywood adaptations of literary novels, in the increasingly library-like spaces of chain bookstores, and in the popular literary fiction that is voraciously consumed today, Collins finds the merger of the once assumed to be high-brow literary with the always known to be low-brow popular. Self-improvement through consumption in these popular spaces, no longer guided by a cultural elite, is instead governed by an individualist consumer culture whose chief achievement seems to be having transformed any measure of “quality” into an appeal to personal taste and a never-ending reservoir of self-help.

The problem, of course, is related to that which dogs Jameson’s rendering of the collapse of high and low: What this postmodern merger meant more often than not was that it was now acceptable for keepers of the high to turn their attention to studying the low; those who had long participated in the popular were no more empowered to encounter high art than they had been before. While Collins’

argument seems to suggest that the elite has become popular, his argument's attention to the ideological underpinnings of contemporary literary pleasure instead hints that this process of popularization has brought the high down low. There is in the argument at one and the same time both a satisfaction in the democratization of pleasures of the literary, recognizing that category's elitist origins and disputing the kinds of uplift that its keepers long claimed it could provide, and a faint vestige of regret at what now passes for literary value. So in a passage such as this—

The conflicts between opposing definitions of what constitutes cultural or critical literacy continue to invest the word "literacy" with a host of preconceptions about what should or shouldn't be learned, by practically everyone, at virtually any age level. I want to come at the question of literacy from another angle—what does the transformation of certain forms of literary reading into popular culture suggest about popular literacy, specifically in terms of what readers are now lead [*sic*] to believe they need to know in order to be culturally literate, not by E. D. Hirsch and company, but by television book clubs, superstore bookshops, mall movie adaptations, and literary bestsellers? (p. 18)

—"popular literacy" is simultaneously a condition achieved in defiance of the keepers of tradition and one constructed by new corporate taste makers; these popular readers are both agents engaged in a process of self-construction through the books they consume and victims "led to believe" that those books say something about who they are.

Collins does valiantly attempt to maintain a balance in his analysis between valorizing the popular experience of cultural pleasures and resisting the commercial and individualist imperatives that create them, but that latter ideological critique inevitably leads to a nagging sense that those who find pleasure in contemporary popular literary culture are operating in a kind of false consciousness. The value judgments that this critique implies become most clear in the final chapter on what Collins refers to as "lit-lit," books that themselves thematize the pleasures of literary reading; a kind of condescension that remained submerged in earlier chapters finally bubbles to the surface:

We are shown people enjoying the pleasures of reading, but the book we hold in our hands offers little more than the literary equivalent of these paintings—the words only depict aesthetic pleasure felt by others, resulting in a bizarre pornography of reading in which pleasure comes from watching others lost in the pleasure of reading really great novels or looking at really great paintings. (p. 254)

*Bring On the Books for Everybody*, on the whole, is a compelling intervention in the kinds of questions about the role of reading in contemporary culture raised by authorities such as the National Endowment for the Arts. One might wish the book had something more of a conclusion, but given the stalemate at which its ideological analysis finally arrives, it is perhaps not surprising that no final word on the value of contemporary literary pleasure is possible.

Both Striplhas' *The Late Age of Print* and Collins' *Bring On the Books for Everybody* employ an analysis of where books have been and what they have meant in order to move their readers' focus

beyond the *apparent* changes on the surface of book culture to explore the *actual* changes in the ways books are produced, distributed, and consumed today. Only in unpacking how books came to occupy their peculiar space as both a fixture of consumer culture and a sacred vehicle for literary culture can we begin to understand the role that the book plays today and the ways that role may develop in the years to come.

Along the way, both argue that neither the book, nor reading, nor anything like literary culture is “dying,” but that these literary formations are instead taking on new forms in relationship to shifting cultural technologies and dynamics. For Striphas, those dynamics are most profoundly affected by the situation of postindustrial labor; for Collins, they're most affected by the deepening relationship between self-definition and consumerism. These different concerns produce strikingly different approaches to contemporary literary culture. For instance, Striphas' approach to the phenomenon of the big-box bookstore is to explore its actual material history, the ways that a particular store has interacted with its community. Collins, by contrast, explores the ways that the big-box bookstore has come to signify literariness, through its architecture, its furnishings, its monumentality. In each case, our assumptions about the relationship between the commercial and the literary are called into question.

Other differences in approach are visible as well: Where Striphas is focused on the production, distribution, and consumption of books in and of themselves, Collins expands the notion of literary culture to include a number of previously paratextual manifestations such as adaptations. Where Striphas focuses on the material and industrial situation of the book, Collins explores the book's place within an ideologically saturated culture of consumption. And while Striphas consciously decenters the act of reading in order to study the other forms of use that people make of books, Collins ties the pleasures of reading itself to the act of contemporary self-fashioning.

In each case, however, the focus remains primarily on the book as we have known it since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Though Striphas discusses e-books and Collins explores film adaptations, the question of what the book itself might become in the networked age is left for future work. Will the book remain an object as we now know it, even if an object with primarily digital manifestations? Will it in that sense remain discrete, cordoned off from other texts, or will it become part of a more generally interconnected textual flow? How will we interact with the future book? And—perhaps even more important—how will we interact with one another within and through that book?

New networked literary systems seem to be springing up almost weekly, from platforms like Goodreads (<http://www.goodreads.com/>) and LibraryThing (<http://www.librarything.com/>) that allow users to share their book collections and reading experiences, to services like Findings (<https://findings.com/>) that facilitate the sharing of annotations. These systems attempt not simply to re-create online the ways that readers have always shared and discussed books, but to re-establish our encounter with the book itself as a fundamentally social interaction. And new modes of production for the literary text—self- and indie-publishing ventures, collaborative writing networks—are similarly transforming the processes and channels through which the book is produced and distributed.

All of these new developments, however, serve as further verification of the positions from which both Striphas and Collins begin: Rather than withering away in an era of media saturation and globalization, the book is instead multiplying, taking on new forms, new audiences, and new meanings. As Striphas notes in his conclusion:

The late age of print isn't a period in which familiar aspects of books and book culture are nearing their final and definitive moment of reckoning. Rather, it's a more dynamic and open-ended moment characterized by both permanence and change. (p. 175)

Perhaps it is not too far off to suggest that the late age of print is a moment characterized by the persistence of change itself, seen in a proliferation of devices and platforms and formats and business models and distribution networks. The irony, of course, is that a description of the shifting landscape of the book that manages to keep up with all of that change simply cannot be produced in book form—or at least not in the form of the book that we have known to date. But these two authors, in capturing the situation of the book in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, provide careful models for thinking through that change, and how it will increasingly characterize the state of literary culture.



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