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The “Right” Way to Read:

Book Clubs, Literary Culture, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Sarah Nimmo

Book clubs, although widespread and popular among members of today's society, are often criticized for the type of books they read and the way they read them. Comprised mostly of women, book clubs are accused by critics of reading books the “wrong” way: the discussions are too emotional and focus too much on the personal experiences of the members (again, mostly women). The books that are read in book clubs are also often looked down upon by the literary elite of society—academics or others who are presumed to be experts in recognizing “good literature”—as being too “middlebrow.” Book club members fail to appreciate, or perhaps are not capable of appreciating, “true” literature. And for the most part, Kathleen Rooney argues, “most people seem fairly comfortable with this long-established tradition by which we, the public, are told how and what to read by various powers that be, many of whom are members of some kind of specialized literary class” (10).

However, these notions have not gone entirely unchallenged. With the creation of Oprah's Book Club and the increasing pervasiveness of the book club discussion guide, books that used to be considered “middlebrow” are now being viewed through a more serious, intellectual lens, and books originally deemed too “highbrow” for the masses are being made accessible to the average reader.

In this paper, I argue that book clubs and book club discussion guides, rather than facilitating purely emotional discussions, promote a much more scholarly and “serious” kind of reading that allows

readers to navigate the confusing affective responses provoked by intellectually and emotionally challenging fiction. As a case study of this phenomenon, I use Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a novel that held considerable cultural capital until being chosen for Oprah's Book Club in 2007. Although some people felt that the literary merit of the work was diminished as a result of being a book club pick, I argue that with the aid of discussion guides, readers can actually read "seriously" and in the process work through the affective response of distress that is provoked by the novel.

There are many conversations that inform my project, the first of which is the history of book clubs and the current conversations surrounding the perceived literary culture that book clubs promote. It is often thought that book clubs encourage a middlebrow type of reading, focusing too much on the emotions and personal experiences of their members. I also examine literary culture in general and what exactly determines a book's value in the eyes of the "literary elite" of society.

The second section of my paper takes a closer look at one book club in particular—Oprah's Book Club, a televised book club begun in 1996 by Oprah Winfrey. The creation of Oprah's Book Club exposed the biases and assumptions about book clubs and challenged them in a very public way. Along those same lines, the third section of my essay examines Winfrey's choice of Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* for her book club and people's (mostly negative) reactions to this choice. McCarthy is often considered one of the literary elite and some would say that associating one of his works with book clubs is not quite cause for celebration. *The Road* is also a difficult novel emotionally for many readers, although critics would argue that focusing on the emotional aspect of the novel promotes a more "middlebrow" reading.

The fourth section of my essay introduces an often overlooked component to conversations surrounding book clubs and reading culture: the book club discussion guide. Discussion guides can aid book clubs in performing what many would consider much more

serious, “academic” readings of books, and in the process work through the difficult emotional experience of reading a book like *The Road*. The final section of my paper then looks at discussion questions for *The Road* specifically and examines how they function in encouraging a more academic reading of the novel. Ultimately, instead of representing a lower form of reading, book clubs and book club discussion guides have the power to make difficult, “elite” novels accessible to the average reader in a way that does not sacrifice any of their literary merit.

1. Book Clubs and Literary Culture

A brief look at the history of the book club in both America and Europe reveals that book clubs were not always regarded with such disdain, at least not in the same way they are today. When book clubs began in Europe in the sixteenth century, they were important vehicles for social change. At this time book clubs were not only about discussing specific books; they were a forum for sharing ideas as well. At their inception they were also primarily women’s groups, since women did not have as many opportunities for education as men did. Elizabeth Long explains that “for the large numbers of middle-class women who could not attend college, the literary club offered the possibility of lifelong learning” (36). These groups were a way for women to read, discuss, and “claim intellectual and moral authority” (Long 33) in a world dominated by men.

Today, although book clubs are still considered to be primarily “women’s groups,” they are not so highly regarded. Instead, they are often accused of damaging a book’s reputation through shallow, emotionally-driven discussions about the story. However, before examining how exactly book clubs function in their discussions, it is important to understand what determines a book’s (or an author’s) status in today’s society.

Two important factors influence a book’s “status” in society, whether it is considered “highbrow” or “middlebrow.” The first is

what Pierre Bourdieu terms "cultural capital." Cultural capital refers to a work's legitimacy within the "bourgeois" circles of society, or the approbation "bestowed by the dominant factions of the dominant class and by the private tribunals" of society (Bourdieu qtd. in Rooney 7). In other words, there is a select cultural elite, often including academics, politicians, or other important figures in society (Rooney argues Oprah belongs in this category), who decides what deserves to be considered good or "highbrow" literature.

A book's "economic capital,"¹ on the other hand, corresponds to a work's popularity with the masses—the "average" readers or common people of society. Rooney explains, "Huge swaths of the population may love reading the latest John Grisham on the train or at the beach . . . but it remains unlikely that you'll find such novels being taught—widely, anyway—at the college level, or see them appearing on the short-lists of preeminent annual literary prizes" (7). Books that are popular with the masses are not considered worthy of high praise within literary circles. In other words, the perceived ratio of a book's cultural to economic capital determines its cultural legitimacy: the higher a work's economic capital, the lower its cultural capital. And the lower a work's cultural capital, the more likely it is that the work will be considered "middlebrow" or unworthy of literary praise. Thus, the books that are read in book clubs are almost by default considered lower quality simply because they are commercially popular.²

In addition to their perceived lack of cultural legitimacy, book clubs are also criticized for the *type of reading* they encourage. Book club discussions are accused of being too emotional, too personal to be taken seriously. As a result, certain books have "been ignored in literary circles because of their genre or their emotive style and subject matter" (Ramone and Cousins 9). If a particular author's book is chosen to be read in a book club, the literary elite would argue that it reflects poorly on that author. Book clubs, although they aid in increasing a work's economic capital, only hurt its cultural capital.

Yet unlike book clubs of the past, book clubs today are no longer limited to groups of people who meet in person; they can take place in online forums or on television, with the participants never actually “meeting” at all. The merging of media and book clubs has added another dimension to conversations about “high” literature and the “right” way to read it. However, few events exploded these conversations quite like the creation of Oprah’s Book Club.

2. Oprah’s Book Club

Founded in 1996 by television personality Oprah Winfrey, Oprah’s Book Club (OBC) challenged the previously established literary status quo by blending cultural capital and economic capital. Rooney asserts, “With over thirteen million regular viewers per book segment, and even more readers (Max 6), the televised club exercised a measurably high influence over the reading public, over authors, and over the publishing industry itself” (8). Without Winfrey’s immense cultural influence, OBC could not have achieved what it did. The book club not only exposed the assumptions that had existed for years about literary taste and book clubs, but it contributed to a shifting of those assumptions that unsettled many people.

When OBC began, it was unlike anything that television, or book clubs for that matter, had ever seen. OBC was a segment of Oprah Winfrey’s talk show in which she selected a book for her audience to read and held a discussion about it with her audience, often inviting the author to come on the show to aid in the discussion. Supporters of the book club praised its inclusive nature, while critics bemoaned its advocacy for the “wrong” way to read: “Both sides made reductive use of the club to galvanize themselves either as populist champions of literature for the masses or as intellectual defenders of literature from the hands of the incompetent” (Rooney 4). Some critics went so far as to say that the club “represented a debasement of the state of American literature, or a subversion of so-called literary taste” (Rooney 2). In reality, Winfrey was merely involving the public in

literary culture, making books accessible to them that had previously only been reserved for the cultural elite, works by revered authors such as Toni Morrison, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner—and Cormac McCarthy. What was perhaps most unsettling for people, and the source of most of the criticism, was Winfrey's merging of elite literature with the two factors normally associated with middlebrow literature: popularity with the masses and emotionally-driven discussions.

Studies have shown that, while some books chosen for OBC were bestsellers before being stamped with Winfrey's seal of approval, Winfrey's endorsement greatly helped sales of the books she chose.³ In this way, books that were previously considered low in economic capital (and therefore superior) became commercialized, losing cultural capital in the process. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo write, "Ironically, it was the very success of this process of popularization, combined with the commodification of the Book Club selections and the branding of the Book Club, that devalued books and reading for the readers in our study" (Fuller 39).⁴ For some authors (such as McCarthy) who were used to their books being read by a fairly narrow and specific audience, this newfound popularity represented a threat to their status in the cultural elite. These authors also feared that Winfrey was encouraging her viewers to read their books the "wrong" way. Jennifer Szalai of *The New Yorker* explains:

The typical complaint has to do with how she [Winfrey] talks about the books. "The Book Club has carved its niche among readers by telling them that the novel is a chance to learn more about themselves," went one salvo, in *The New Republic* a couple of years ago, taking particular issue with her reading of the classics. "It's not about literature or writing; it's about looking into a mirror and deciding what type of person you are, and how you can be better." ("Oprah Winfrey: Book Critic")

This sentiment echoes the long-held opinion of book clubs as spaces that lack a serious form of reading and discussion, spaces that instead

take pains to connect the book to the readers' personal experiences or emotions. This type of reading is considered highly un-academic and as a result, not something to be taken seriously.

In spite of its criticism, OBC was able to expose the flaws in the literary hierarchy as no other book club could. Because of Winfrey's influence, OBC provided a much more public challenge to traditionally held ideas about book clubs, something that had never been done before. In describing the effects of the very similar Richard & Judy Book Club, Fuller and Rehberg voice what also holds true for OBC: "The Book Club threatened readers' ideological investment in reading as a 'high culture' activity, not only by making book reading seem accessible and attractive to those outside the 'reading class' (Griswold 2008) and thus less of a 'niche' pursuit, but also by blurring the markers of 'good taste'" (Fuller 28). OBC threatened the power of the reading elite and the rigidity of the literary hierarchy.⁵ Rooney contends, "If we are willing to let it, OBC—with its sometimes surprising heterogeneity and eclecticism—stands to prove that there exists a far greater fluidity among the traditional categories of artistic classification than may initially meet the eye" (5). Perhaps a book's value cannot simply be reduced to the binary of cultural vs. economic capital; there is a wider range of gray areas than people initially thought.

3. OBC and Cormac McCarthy

In 2007, Oprah Winfrey chose Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* for her book club. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel seemed like an unconventional choice for any book club, due mainly to its style and emotionally difficult nature—and, some would argue, because of McCarthy's status as one of the cultural elite. *The Road* is a prime example of a book that has relatively high cultural capital and relatively low economic capital—in other words, it is read by a select few who are thought to have a higher understanding of literature, and it is thus valued because of its narrow audience reach.

However, after being chosen as an OBC book, the economic capital of *The Road* soared. According to Nielsen.com:

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and named to Oprah's Book Club in 2007, this title became a movie in 2009, so it's no surprise that the book has sold more than 1.5 million copies in total. However, P.O. (pre-Oprah), 'The Road' sold just 156,000 units (178,000 copies of the hardcover edition to date); the Oprah trade paperback edition has sold a whopping 1.4 million units. ("The Oprah Effect")

We know that *in theory*, once a book has achieved a high economic capital, its cultural capital diminishes. Does that mean, then, that after Winfrey popularized *The Road* and allowed millions of people to engage with the story, it becomes a "lesser" book as a result?

McCarthy, for one, thought so, although to the surprise of many he agreed to appear on Winfrey's show OBC—his only television appearance to date. Austin Allen comments, "Given McCarthy's legendary reticence . . . and exalted literary stature . . . this was one of the greatest 'gets' in the history of television. It was also one of the strangest . . . [I]t evoked a collision between opposing subatomic particles: a smashing together, by sheer force of will, of mass media and solitary art" ("Cormac and Oprah, Revisited"). Here were two powerful cultural figures from different ends of the spectrum: McCarthy as one of the literary elite and Winfrey as a representative of the masses. In all of Winfrey's author interviews and book discussions, the discrepancy was never so obvious as during McCarthy's interview. Allen aptly describes McCarthy's demeanor as "courteous but effortlessly deflective" during the interview ("Cormac and Oprah, Revisited"). When Winfrey asked, "Do you care if, now, millions of people are reading your books, versus when there were only a few thousand reading your books?" McCarthy vaguely replied, "You would like for the people that would appreciate the book to read it, but as far as many, many people reading it, so what?" ("Cormac McCarthy on Writing"). Although he did not give a straight-up "No," McCarthy's answer seems to indicate that popularity with the masses

was never on his agenda. But it did become popular, although its popularity did not make it any less challenging.

The Road is certainly a tough read for many people, in more ways than one. Aside from McCarthy's unique writing style, the book presents the reader with a confusing and challenging emotional experience. The plot focuses on a father and son as together they traverse the wasted landscape of a post-apocalyptic Earth, trying to reach the coast and in the process avoiding the bands of cannibals that roam the streets. Readers find themselves simultaneously drawn to the father-son duo and repulsed by the world they inhabit. The book contains elements of suicide, violence, and cannibalism, made all the more disturbing because one of the main characters is a young boy. In one scene, the man and the boy explore a seemingly abandoned house only to find themselves in a basement full of emaciated people waiting to be eaten (110-111); in another, one of the roaming cannibals seizes the boy and is promptly shot by the man. The cannibal's brain matter sprays over the boy, still locked in his arms, from the force of the bullet (62-66). It is moments like these that evoke some of the stronger and more negative affective experiences in readers, yet readers are still filled with empathy for the man and the boy—perhaps even more so as a result of these moments.

In her interview with McCarthy, Winfrey asks, "Is this a love story to your son?" McCarthy hides his face behind his hand and sinks further down in his chair before replying, "You know, I suppose it is, although that's kind of embarrassing" ("Oprah's Exclusive Interview"). McCarthy's shame at admitting this deeply emotional aspect of his novel is reflective of the existing attitude about literature as high art—it should not have an emotional component, or at least not a feminized one. However, it is also confirmation that there are indeed some deeply emotional elements at the core of this novel, an aspect that cannot and should not be ignored in discussions of the novel. Fortunately, there is one aspect of book clubs that can be helpful in a situation such as this, and one that critics seem to have overlooked: the discussion guide.

4. The Book Club Discussion Guide

Many book club meetings, in person and online, are conducted with the aid of discussion guides, the purpose of which is to generate discussion about certain aspects of a particular book, aspects which vary depending on the guide. If discussion guides are not provided within an actual text, a quick Google search reveals discussion questions for most books—contemporary and classic—from publishers' websites, authors' websites, and blogs. These discussion guides are not only important to understanding what kind of reader book clubs encourage, but how this particular kind of reading is actually much more intellectual than people think.

So what kind of reader do book club discussion guides seem to construct? William McGinley and Katanna Conley, both literature scholars, conducted a study of 120 discussion guides in order to determine, based on the kinds of questions these guides were asking, the kind of reader publishing companies hope to shape ("Literary Retailing"). McGinley and Conley detected trends across these guides in regard to which particular aspects of a book the guides focused on. They determined that the most common elements of a novel covered by the discussion guides included "aesthetic or stylistic features"; an author's literary reputation; character analysis or techniques used by an author to develop characters; and narrative techniques (214, 215, 217). All of these elements point to a more thoughtful, conventionally "academic" reading of a novel rather than the emotionally-driven readings that book clubs have been accused of endorsing. McGinley and Conley conclude that "book club guides represent a relatively new social mechanism through which the modern book industry is capable of authorizing not only 'preferred' books for the reading public, but also 'preferred' ways of reading and responding to such books in the company of other readers" (220). This "preferred" way of reading, however, is exactly what book clubs are accused of falling short of. McGinley and Conley address this concern as well:

As an approach to reading, or to books more generally, the guides do not ‘market’ a simple or vernacular gaze for prospective readers. Rather, they recommend that books be approached through a particular aesthetic lens defined by attention to form, style, and generally in terms of formal literary features that would seem to discourage or even deny more colloquial enjoyment or facile involvement with books, and perhaps with other readers. (214)

Based on their research, McGinley and Conley conclude that these guides in fact promote more intellectual readings of books by encouraging readers to pay attention to specific authorial choices rather than discussing the book in the context of their own experiences.

Book club discussion guides provide “a new mechanism for competing with a range of other social and commercial organizations for positions of cultural authority among the reading public” (McGinley and Conley 219). In other words, these guides, like OBC, blur the line between the literary elite and the masses; they provide a way for the common reader to engage in academic discussion of a book; they can be especially helpful when presented with a book like *The Road*, which is not only difficult intellectually, but emotionally as well. By discussing the book in terms of narrative technique or character analysis, readers have a means of working through some of the difficult emotions evoked by the book in a more “intellectual” way.

5. Reading *The Road* in Book Club

In her review of *The Road*, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* writes, “‘The Road’ offers nothing in the way of escape or comfort. But its fearless wisdom is more indelible than reassurance could ever be” (“The Road Through Hell”). Indeed, the book is psychologically challenging in more ways than one. In his study of readers’ responses to *The Road*, Marco Caracciolo writes, “Out of the 453 reviews that

explicitly refer to the spatial setting of the novel, 242 (about 53%) convey an emotional response, either through emotionally charged adjectives or through detailed accounts of the reviewer's emotional reactions" (434). However, the most poignant emotional aspect is the dual experience of empathy and revulsion, which I will refer to as *distress*. Psychologists Michael D. Large and Kristen Marcussen write that "[stress] refers to the relationship between external conditions and an individual's current state (Burke 1991b), or certain characteristics of the individual including values, perceptions, resources, and skills (Aneshensel 1992). *Distress* is defined as an internal, subjective response to stress (Burke 1991b)" (49). The distress that readers feel during and after reading *The Road* is a response to the stress of being simultaneously drawn with empathy toward the two main characters (a father and son) and repulsed by the world they live in. Caracciolo later quotes one of the reader responses directly: "This book is an emotional blow to the gut on a full belly" (Lizwah qtd. in Caracciolo 434). Shelly L. Rambo also argues that "without reading the book, the reader might sense the possibility of hope, of divine presence, even of redemption . . . But those who have made it through the 240 pages of *The Road* may have a more complicated reaction to [its] final paragraphs" (Rambo 100). In short, there is substantial evidence that indicates reading *The Road* is not an easy emotional experience for many people, the majority of them "average" readers.

A look at the discussion guides provided for *The Road* on both Winfrey's website and the publisher's (Random House) website confirms much of what McGinley and Conley found in their study. The majority of the discussion questions focus on close reading and analysis of specific quotes, character analysis, and symbolism. Only one question attempts to connect the novel to the personal experiences and emotions of the reader, and this is but a follow-up question to one about narrative technique: "What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?" Even so, these questions prove useful in promoting a

discussion that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally satisfying.

The first parts of the previously mentioned question pose a more traditionally “academic” perspective: “How is Cormac able to make the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and visceral in their depiction of this blasted landscape?” (“*The Road*” Discussion Questions). As Caracciolo says, “Narrative space seems to be intimately bound up with the emotional impact of this novel” (434). By discussing narrative techniques such as imagery and tone, readers are able to give a voice to the revulsion and discomfort they feel about the world that McCarthy creates in a more “serious,” academic way.

As an example, let us look at how McCarthy depicts the landscape of *The Road*. Ciarán Dowd uses the term “geophysiology”⁶ to describe McCarthy’s technique of blending the earth with the human in his descriptive language. Essentially a type of personification, this technique describes aspects of the earth in terms that would normally be used to describe the human body, human illnesses, etc. For example, McCarthy describes the landscape “like some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3) and as an “ashen scabland” (16). Caracciolo echoes Dowd’s claim by pointing out that McCarthy’s “metaphors blend the landscape with a human being by attributing to it either bodily states and injuries (paleness, burns, hydropsy) or emotional states (‘sullen’ and ‘mortified’)” (Caracciolo 436). This narrative technique by McCarthy provokes a strong affective response in the reader by enhancing the descriptions of the already bleak landscape with very human characteristics. But by using the discussion guide to discuss these characteristics in a more intellectual way, the reader is able to not only voice his/her emotions, but to do so in a way that validates them because they are able to point to specific techniques used by McCarthy to evoke these emotions.

Another question that is useful is, "Why do you think Cormac has chosen not to give his characters names? How to the generic labels of 'the man' and 'the boy' affect the way in which readers relate to them?" ("The Road Discussion Questions"). This question focuses again on a specific narrative technique, but also brings up characterization; no part of it directly relates to the emotions or experiences of the reader. However, in answering this question, the reader can again give voice to his/her emotions in a way that validates them, but also points to specific textual evidence and deliberate techniques by McCarthy.

This question focuses more on the father and son, characters that the readers are no doubt drawn to because of their "emotionally compelling relationship" (Rambo 107). Throughout the novel the father's intense love for his son is obvious: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 5). Dowd asserts that the novel has "an affective power which fosters a response of gratitude and appreciation in the reader for the world as it currently stands, imperfect though It may be" (Dowd 39). Within that gratitude for the safety and peace of our own lives is a sense of pity for the father and son, forced to survive in this world. However, in focusing more on the way McCarthy chooses to characterize them as "the man" and "the boy," readers can approach an emotionally heavy issue in a more intellectual way. Instead of lamenting the fate of the characters, book club members may instead discuss how the absence of proper names for the characters makes it easier to relate to them, because "the man" and "the boy" could be any man or boy. The discussion guide once again serves to unite the emotional and the intellectual in book club discussions.

6. Conclusion

During his interview with Oprah, when asked what he wants readers to get out of *The Road*, McCarthy responds: "To care about

things, and people. And be more appreciative. Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad. We should appreciate it more. We should be grateful. I don't know who to be grateful to, but . . . you should be thankful for what you have" ("Cormac McCarthy on Writing"). As I have shown, it is simply incorrect to assume that by reading *The Road* in the context of a book club, people will somehow read it the "wrong" way or miss the larger meaning of the work. Instead, book clubs and book club discussion guides can help readers explode the binary between cultural capital and economic capital. It is possible for a book to have both without losing any of its artistic integrity. Discussion guides do not reduce books to less than their intended meaning; rather, they help readers engage with this meaning in a way that both allows them to work through their emotions and focus on what many would consider the more "literary" aspects of a work.

Notes

¹ The terms "cultural capital" and "economic capital" were first coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his essay "The Field of Cultural Production: The Economic World Reversed."

² Jennifer Szalai of *The New Yorker* attests that "the presumptive divvying up of cultural artifacts into high and low, the notion that there exists a province of high art that happens to be both inviolable and vulnerable—such ideas can harden into certitude, no matter how contradictory and inconsistent they are" ("Oprah Winfrey: Book Critic").

³ See "The Oprah Effect: Closing the Book on Oprah's Book Club," *Nielsen.com*, 20 May 2011.

⁴ Although Fuller and Sedo are referring to the Richard & Judy Book Club, a televised book club in England modeled after OBC, the same principles apply to OBC. For more on the Richard & Judy Book Club, see Jenni Ramone and Helen Cousins, eds., *The Richard & Judy Book Club Reader*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011.

⁵ Szalai contests, "For literary purists, everything that Winfrey brings—the sales bump, the best-seller status, anything having to do with the word 'popular'—no doubt signifies trouble rather than salvation, further proof of

the irreconcilable gulf between mass culture and genuine art" ("Oprah Winfrey: Book Critic").

⁶ Dowd explains: "This term, popularised by James Lovelock, refers to the study of the health of the planet considered as one vast superorganism" (35).

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