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Judging Books by Their Covers:

Reese's Book Club and Contemporary Bookishness

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Introduction: A New Middlebrow in the Making

In a world where nearly any image, video, or piece of writing is available with a quick Google search—with more being posted every day than one person could look at in a lifetime—the practice of sitting down and consuming a full-length book has a lot to compete with. Yet, reading feels more alive than ever if you just know where to look. The hallowed halls of academia may contain fewer literature students than they used to, but reading—now more than ever—is not limited to only the intellectual elite. Indeed, if the algorithms within your social media diet detect even a hint of interest in reading, you've likely dipped your toe into decentralized, hyper-specific communities like BookTok and BookTube and the various factions within. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit during my senior year of high school and the world went into lockdown, I retreated into my childhood habit of voracious reading. But, no longer could I go to the library and pick out whatever looked interesting; turning to the advice of others was necessary, and, not knowing many other readers personally, the best option was to see what people on the internet were saying. What I read became a factor of what the influencers I was following recommended. As I started college and began studying Computer Science, this tension between long-form books and the short-form mediums by which information about them was transmitted grew more fascinating. As I learned about the underlying algorithms in my studies in Computer Science, my desire to qualitatively examine the types of books that people were reading and recommending outside of the walls of the university—the middlebrow—expanded. When I added on an English major, this dichotomy between what is studied and what is widely read grew, and I began to wonder what could be gained from using the tools of academic literature to examine the more middlebrow titles and interpretations that are currently dominating the broader world of books.

Despite catastrophization in recent decades that the internet will ruin the practice of consuming long-form media, novels—along with most things that can be read, watched, or listened to—continue to grow in their production quantities (Swirski). Increasingly, digital communication and distribution make it easier for Americans—particularly those who live in less populated places—to receive information about books. While networks for the recommendation and distribution of literature—especially that which is marketed to a broader or layperson audience—have historical roots much before the 21st century, modern digital infrastructure has broadened literary influence beyond established cultural institutions. Indeed, these digital, decentralized channels impact the formal networks responsible for distributing literature and the desires and actions of the consumers who fuel this extensive ecosystem.

When walking into a bookstore these days—or, for that matter, opening certain social media apps—a consumer with a proclivity for the literary would be remiss not to notice the pomp and circumstance surrounding the promotion of many new books. Whether these marketing tactics aid any given reader in choosing which books to read or instead function as warnings for which to avoid—for example, a Barnes & Noble display of books currently trending on TikTok—there are numerous people behind the scenes, both directly and indirectly making recommendations as to which books may appeal to varied groups of consumers. As technology has evolved, so have the mediums through which books have been suggested; from the lending libraries of Jane Austen's time to monthly mail-order reading club selections to the contemporary BookTok community, the ways we hear about books have changed just as much as how we communicate.

However advanced our methods become, it is a relatively simple symbol of approval that communicates much information in a tiny package: the sticker. Whether denoting a highbrow

literary award—like the Pulitzer Prize or the Man Booker Prize—a stalwart organization's approval—*The New York Times* or *Good Morning America*—or, perhaps most relevant for purposes of examining the contemporary middlebrow, a celebrity book club. Oprah pioneered this not-so-small niche in the 90s—reportedly bumping the sales numbers of her picks by 500,000 copies—and copious celebrities, from Emma Watson to Emma Roberts to Reese Witherspoon, have followed her lead. Readers may often be warned not to judge a book by its cover, but today, it isn't just the graphic design of a book's jacket that sends signals to a potential reader about their level of interest. Now, veritable seals of approval—whether physically printed on books or immortalized on an online list or post—complicate further this seemingly simple idiom. The recommendation systems of contemporary books have grown much more visible in light of the internet. In this increase in optics surrounding books, aesthetics have become a central player when considering how books are chosen and read, making images of books and the consumable materials—both in the sense of physical products and digital media—related to them more important than the books themselves.

Defining the Middlebrow

> But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between… in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige. The middlebrow curries favour with both sides equally.
>
> – Virginia Woolf, *A Letter Written but Not Sent*

Literary scholars and book historians have worked to define the middlebrow, a particularly tricky category of reader and book—though it is not a segment of scholarship that is heavily fleshed out. This can be partially chalked up to its definition in contrast to that which is seen as the most prestigious literature. The term "middlebrow" emerged a little over a hundred years ago—though the practice of judging the seriousness of literary materials and enjoyers is much older—and has often been used as a means of degradation toward people outside of the machinations of the traditional literary sphere ("Middlebrow, Adj.", "Middlebrow, N."). It can be used as a noun to describe a person or the general category between highbrow and lowbrow, as Woolf used it numerous times in the above epigraph. Though nowadays, it is often used as an adjective for describing a book's location in the relative hierarchy of literary quality—e.g., "That *NYT* bestseller is too middlebrow to win the Booker Prize." As Virginia Woolf's description shows, this is a difficult distinction to make due to the category's definitional positionality between lowbrow and highbrow, categories which are themselves imprecise.

While it may be easy to definitively classify something very literary as highbrow and something altogether commercial as lowbrow, the lines cordoning off the middle are pretty blurry. The OED also describes middlebrow as demarcated by being "intellectually unchallenging." This is in direct distinction with the highbrow books that are often seen as more worthy of academic scholarship and attention. Interestingly, the official definitions of middlebrow are not very denotationally different than those of lowbrow ("Lowbrow, Adj., Sense 2."). This is indicative of broader linguistic trends wherein words denotatively created to mean "average" become more negative in connotation over time. Linguist Adam Aleksic describes this phenomenon as "word inflation," when terms that began as having a meaning of middling or commonplace, like "pedestrian" or "trivial," now have somewhat negative meanings, often

because they are used to refer to people in lower socioeconomic classes (Aleksic). Middlebrow, similarly, on the surface, seems like it should refer to books of average literary quality, but it has come to carry an undesirable meaning. As it stands, the middlebrow is hard to place but easy to dismiss.

Scholars today generally agree that middlebrow literature straddles the line between popularity and prestige, providing a commercially successful book that is enjoyable to read but also provides the reader with some literary value (Driscoll, Radway). It can describe a group of readers or a particular book or genre of book. Additionally, an undeniably highbrow book can be read in a middlebrow way by middlebrow—or even, gasp, lowbrow—readers. Middlebrow literature has also traditionally been mediated by people who are considered cultural authorities—"the highbrows"—such as those involved in the publishing industry or academia. But, beyond the literary magazine writeup or novelistic prize list, direct advertisement of books and their surrounding promotional mechanisms—even when done by "highbrows"—have long been disdained. An anonymous critic in 1927 asked, "Has America a literary dictatorship?" They explored the perils of the rising popularity of commercial book clubs—specifically The Book of the Month Club—going on to ponder the lack of existence of a "Box of Candy A Week Club." "For $3 a year, only a few cents a week, you have the service of these great experts in choosing your confections. Enjoy the satisfaction of eating the most nourishing, purest, and most authoritatively recommended candy in the United States." This parallel points to the idea that books are commercial items, even if they did not use to be treated as such. It also implies that the types of books recommended by the club are sugary, less fulfilling than their highbrow counterparts. Today, there is more of an implicit assumption that books aren't so special as to be

outside of broader marketing systems—when a new hardcover retails at over $25, it's hard to ignore the outside factors that contribute to a book's production and sales.

However, not all scholars even recognize the middlebrow as a category. In his book *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*, Peter Swirski argues that, since highbrow books often have aspects common in lowbrow and vice-versa, there is no need for the distinctions. He finds labels like "highbrow" and "lowbrow" unproductive and does not acknowledge the middlebrow (Swirski). I push back on this, even if the difference is just in how works are advertised, the proverbial container in which they are sold—and many scholars would agree that the quality of writing also proves an important factor—the very fact of the literary majority believing that it is real makes the brow system important enough to take seriously and not just discard. While middlebrow and lowbrow literature have historically been of less interest to scholars working in literary studies, they are also the majority of what is being published and must be at least considered when determining the current state of the industry writ large.

It's a Bird, it's a Plane, it's a Book Club!

Before turning to contemporary influencer culture, a look at previous systems of middlebrow recommendation is in order. Scholars identify the Book of the Month Club (BOMC) as a critical arbiter of middlebrow literature, emerging around the 1920s, when the term "middlebrow" came into use (Radway, Rubin). Conveniently enough, BOMC still exists, but in a form that is wholly unlike that of its conception. They have adapted to the times, promoting themselves on social media platforms like YouTube to market their subscription box through paid advertisements and creator sponsorships. It has long tried to capitalize on trends; after WWII, non-literati audiences generated an increased demand for educational opportunities and

methods of self-improvement (Rubin). Those who came to be known as the early tastemakers of middlebrow literature—and other forms of media, such as radio—explored this business opportunity by providing avenues through which decently educated—but not socially elite—Americans could partake in books and learning materials that would be good for their intellectual development but would also provide entertainment (Radway). A vital distinction between middlebrow and highbrow lies in this fact of willful commerciality. More importantly than whether it confers any literary clout, a successful middlebrow novel brings the author financial remuneration.

The Book of the Month Club was initially created as a mechanism by which subscribers could receive paper books mailed to their houses chosen by a group of literary judges, like Harry Scherman, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Christopher Morley. They aimed to capitalize on the middle-class desire to be educated and worked to select titles that properly toed the line between educational and enjoyable. Early critiques of the BOMC disdained its commodification of high culture and its reductivity toward the broad spectrum of good literature. The club worked to "Fordize" the book distribution system to its greatest possible efficiency, even, at times, bundling books with sweet treats or marketing specialty collectible box sets before finding the niche of mail-order book subscriptions, which was a strategy to ensure continual profits. BOMC established itself as a moral authority to dial into the psychology of the consumer and exploit their fears of being seen as undereducated.

Both Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway—two literary scholars who have done extensive research on the twentieth-century middlebrow—have highlighted the centricity of the eastern city as a producer and distributor of culture, the latter naming a section in her book "A Desire Called New York." This trend suggests that the cultural capital associated with the

highbrow can be attained by not just an academic affiliation but also by living in and participating in the arts scene in a place that is thought to hold a higher level of prestige, an idea that Chad Harbach has also explored in his essay “MFA vs NYC” (Harbach). Especially in terms of literariness, New York has a significant advantage in being the primary place in America associated with publishing and media. Before the internet, physical distance proved a barrier that necessitated a certain level of filtering for books to get from where they were produced into the hands of those who wished to read them. The feedback loops for book distribution have been tightened with the internet, with most readers having the ability to access both recommendations and the books themselves nearly instantly through social media, online shopping, and the proliferation of e-books and audiobooks. Additionally, it is easier than ever for laypeople to provide their opinions on the books they read through online reviews and user-generated content, further turning the wheels of this ever-expanding cycle.

Book clubs like BOMC and today's newer, social media-based groups are perhaps more one-sided than their names imply. While book recommendation systems formulated as clubs have been around for at least a century—and readers have been discussing books with each other since their inception—the overall reading landscape and the mediums by which books are arbitrated have changed. For example, Amazon.com has risen tremendously as a bookseller over the past twenty-plus years, now accounting for over half of all book sales in the United States (McGurl 448). The site’s continual impact on the book industry—while broader monetary ambitions have eclipsed its initial mission—speaks to the fact that, while books hold immense power between their pages, they are, when it comes down to it, also material goods. While physical bookstores are certainly not extinct, they have been decreasing in numerousness (Census). General trends point to a concomitant steep increase in the amount of reading material

available but a decrease in the variety of businesses from which Americans acquire said written works. Self-publishing—such as Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing—has helped lead to this increase, along with the continual innovations that allow paper books to be produced in more streamlined methods or as e-books that just require a digital download (McGurl). Additionally, user-generated content sites such as Goodreads—which is also owned by Amazon—and the ability for readers to create book-related posts on most social media platforms have aided in this mass decentralization of book-related content. There are fewer authoritative sources from which to receive novelistic endorsements, and those that persist often are on the same wavelength vis-à-vis which books and authors are worthy of promoting (Driscoll). No longer is from whom you gather your book recommendations as simple a question as opening the newspaper—or even turning on the TV or radio. Rather than positioning themselves as cultural authorities, the middlebrow arbiters of today pose as our friends—or a facsimile of such—and create digital cults of personality that we can access at any time and in any place.

A contemporary arbiter of middlebrow literature need not have the same Ivy League pedigree as Scherman—the founder of the BOMC; however, they still work towards similar goals: profit through the recommendation of something they are passionate about. Ultimately, as Woolf described, the middlebrow aims to have it both ways, and this hit a nerve with the highbrow folks for whom this threatened their superiority of intellect and social capital (Radway). In the past, however, the power of the BOMC lay more in the summation of its influence as an institution; the individual actors involved in the selection and administrative processes were not well known to the public. This is somewhat at odds with the most well-known arbiters of recent times who, regardless of whether they use their name to garner an

audience or build one from the ground up, are recognizable as individuals, whether or not they are tied to a broader organization, such as Oprah Winfrey.

In the late ‘90s and early aughts, it seemed like Oprah could snap her fingers, and half a million copies of a book she chose for her eponymous reading club would be printed, bestickered, and snapped up by her ardent television viewers. While the rise of the radio proved significant for middlebrow culture at large, Oprah’s use of the medium of television was a crucial step in using audiovisual mediums for specifically talking about books on a national scale (Rubin). Oprah had one rule for her Book Club 1.0—which ran from 1996-2002—that the books she chose must be written by an author who was still alive. However, her selections had no restrictions beyond being a book she loved and wanted to champion to her considerable audience. While Winfrey continues to choose the occasional title now, over twenty years later—which, no doubt, is afforded celebrity it would not otherwise—the minute the first iteration of her club ended in 2002, others started capitalizing on her savvy idea, leading to book clubs led by other celebrities, television networks, and ordinary people. Oprah’s Book Club (OBC) led to many articles, academic books, and general discourse in the literary sphere, including discussions of the “right way” to read and interpret literature. Naturally, this clash of highbrow and middlebrow ideologies led to some controversy throughout Oprah’s tenure as an arbiter of books for a layperson audience. Winfrey’s choice of Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* was probably the most salient and discussed moment of the initial iteration of OBC. While fellow respected literary icon Toni Morrison had works of hers selected for OBC multiple times and had generally positive things to say about the club, Franzen spoke openly on his reservations about his novel being picked by Oprah—particularly as a man who wanted other men to read his books—leading to her disinviting him from appearing on the book club episode. This highlights

the tension inherent in situations in which the "browness" of a reader differs from that which is being read.

Oprah's strategy for her book club was always to see how her readers could relate to the varying topics in her picks through their own struggles. The books were not chosen for educational purposes; however, many would be considered to have literary merit, such as *We Were the Mulvaneys* by Joyce Carol Oates or Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*. She promoted books as therapy, encouraging readers to find catharsis in the difficult situations the novels she chose dealt with. While she had significant influence, Oprah, frankly, did not need to make money from the book club—as she became a billionaire in 2003 and recently is worth almost three billion—and did not pursue the possible avenues of monetization that her book club could have begotten (Bloomenthal). There was undoubtedly an opportunity to do so, but she—according to herself—was doing it out of her passion for reading and desire to share that with her viewers, not to accrue more wealth. Winfrey has said, "Some women have a weakness for shoes...I can go barefoot if necessary. I have a weakness for books." She feminizes the idea of reading here, showing books as something she aspires to have and to read, an impulse which she can't stifle. Some writers responded to Oprah's seemingly themed selections by producing works that matched the vibes of past selections, but choosing these books would have been antithetical to her goals. She did not wish to continue the club with books about which she was not passionate—the reading discussion episodes were popular enough, but not usually as much as or more so than her other shows (Rooney 168-9). Indeed, Oprah's motives could easily be confused with those of an English professor hoping to share their joys with willing students; however, how she treated said books was far from traditional literary analysis, likely leading to much controversy over her club since it was not just for money, nor to primarily examine

literature qua literature. Today, this has become increasingly common, with celebrities and regular people alike recommending books for readers looking for anything from guilty pleasures to beach reads to those that will make you cry.

To understand the phenomenon of the middlebrow influencer in the digital landscape of books, I will be studying Reese's Book Club. In the first chapter, I look at the club as a whole, examining the types of books it promotes and how it does so. This is accomplished through computational analysis, which allows me to gain a sense of trends exhibited by Reese's Book Club in ways impossible from reading each individual selection. Chapter 1 ends by determining which books from the collection are most and least representative of the corpus. This leads me into Chapter 2, in which I perform a comparative close reading on one of each to explore, at the book level, how a typical Reese pick and an atypical pick reflect upon the characteristic attributes of the middlebrow. Through this analysis, I describe how the depiction of reading, writing, and authorship within the choices yield insights into the publishing industry and current trends in the consumption of books. While research into the literary middlebrow is already minimal, that which has been done in the past becomes quickly dated due to the rapidity with which changing technological mediums affect its current state. Additionally, the use of Digital Humanities methods in literary studies is a growing field that has not yet fully reached its potential, particularly when combined with a subfield of English Literature that is itself understudied. Thus, my research represents an identification of a gap in critical knowledge of an increasingly impactful subsection of the current systems of publishing, reading, and consumption and an attempt to begin to fill in said gaps and offer suggestions for broadening the research started in this paper.

Chapter 1: Legally Bookish

Who is Reese Witherspoon?

Reese Witherspoon is best known for her work as an actress in films such as *Legally Blonde*, *American Psycho,* and *Wild*, but in recent years, she has expanded her repertoire into the broader media production world. She was born and raised mainly in the South and has written about her experiences growing up in Louisiana and Tennessee. Witherspoon began acting in her teenage years, temporarily attending Stanford University before returning to the screen full-time. She won several awards for her appearance in the movie *Walk the Line* in the mid-2000s and has received much general acclaim for the numerous other films in which she has starred. Recently, she appeared on streaming series like *Little Fires Everywhere* and *Big Little Lies.* This shift in content format comes along with her new business interests. Not entirely satisfied with the roles in which she was being cast, Witherspoon decided to put things in her own hands by launching a production company called Pacific Standard in 2012 and then Hello Sunshine in 2016. She launched Reese's Book Club the following year (Editors, Tikkanen).

What is Reese's Book Club?

Reese's Book Club (RBC) is an online organization led by Witherspoon that recommends one book each month to its members—membership entailing just a follow of one of the club's accounts. It began in 2017 and is primarily run through email, Instagram, and other social media platforms. There is no fee for entry, and the club does not have centralized, formal monthly meetings. From the official website, the premise of RBC is as such:

> Each month, Reese, our founder (and book-lover-in-chief) chooses a book with a woman at the center of the story. There's not a formula to the books we spotlight, and we like it

that way. We make our choices thoughtfully and look for ways to deepen our connection to books, authors and ourselves.

The term “book-lover-in-chief” combines corporate lingo with cutesy wordplay, which is indicative of broader trends in the club: it is at its core a money-making enterprise, though its outer appearance does not extensively push the commercial part of its agenda. RBC implies the books they choose are based on their value to Reese and her readers rather than fitting into a particular niche. The phrase “There's not a formula to the books we spotlight” feels defensive, particularly in our social media culture that often encourages “If you liked this, then read that.”

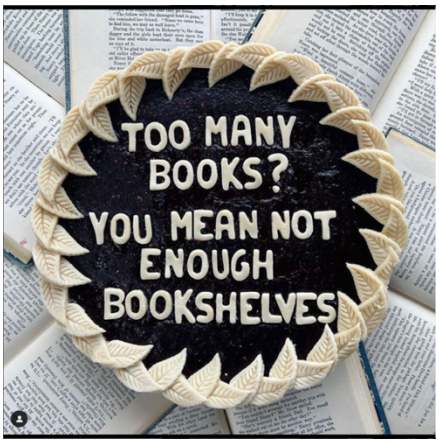

Image 1: Bookish pie posted on @reesesbookclub Instagram

Indeed, much of the content on RBC pages either highlights Reese’s favorite books or otherwise promotes them through photos that aestheticize reading and coziness, including many pies, mugs, Little Free Libraries, and the like that fit the overall theme (see Images 1-3).

Image 2: Cat mug on a stack of RBC picks

Image 3: Little Free Library filled with RBC picks

The photos of books and related materials contribute to the overall visual theme of the page. It not only inspires reading but promotes an ideal lifestyle wherein books are centered and are not just for reading but also for portraying a certainmessage. The website emphasizes the importance of the authors to the club, which makes sense given their involvement in often creating content for the website and social media

accounts or attending events associated with RBC. Reese has a handful of authors from whom she has chosen multiple works, acted in adaptations for, or produced their books. While women are at the center, based on the way the books of the club are displayed, there seems to be, if not a formula, then a set of heuristics with which the selections are chosen. As the club has been around for over six years, it has created a fleshed-out niche and curated a well-aligned brand image.

The idea of bookishness looms large in RBC, with the official Instagram account posting stacks of books with attractive spines and covers, posed in front of aesthetic backgrounds and around tchotchkes often associated with reading, such as mugs, plants, and stationery. As Jessica Pressman writes in her aptly titled book, "bookishness is about class and consumerism. It is about constructing and projecting identity through the possession and presentation of books" (Pressman 12). Pressman describes a variety of bookish possessions that were popular within online communities after the inception of the internet, such as a Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice* bedspread, an old book-shaped MacBook or iPhone cover, and cupcakes with edible faux novels on them. These objects—perhaps now best described as of the Tumblr era—are markedly different than those associated with Reese's Instagram-ready bookish items. Pressman's bookish objects have a strong whiff of kitsch and are easy to ridicule, such as cheap leggings printed with pages from *Pride and Prejudice*. "There can be pleasure in feeling superior to the people who wear Austen leggings, and there can be pleasure in feeling superior to the people who don't feel the leggings" (Pressman 94). The ability to participate in book-related material cultures has also led to the critique of such choices. Now, contrary to the belief that the web would eradicate the printed word, the internet gives people an even easier way of showing others what you ostensibly value—and what you definitely do not. RBC is more of a social media archive of pretty photos

and trendy short-form videos promoting Reese's books and the lifestyle associated with them than a forum for discussion, and the multifaceted layers of consumerism strongly contribute to this goal.

The club has existed more than long enough to become generally known. Still, when searching in an online academic database for "Reese's Book Club," there is but a single brief article describing Witherspoon's production company's partnership with Buick to play audiobooks from her app in their cars ("Reese Witherspoon"). While this speaks to the commercial nature of Reese's enterprise, it only lays out the facts of the brand deal without any critique. There is a notable lack of academic literature describing or critiquing the club, even though it is an undeniably influential player in the publishing world. Indeed, for authors, "getting picked by Witherspoon is like winning the lottery" (Rosenfield). Reese has also created a fellowship program called LitUp, which supports diverse female and nonbinary authors in bringing their ideas to the page. This program, associated with the club, empowers authors who may not have traditionally had a voice in publishing and gives her a built-in pipeline for feminine stories to share with her club members. This goes against the grain, as the "publishers' less famous "mid-list" authors are overwhelmingly white" (So and Wezerek). For all of her book choices, she centers the voices of her authors and the plot of their books while providing light commentary on the merits of the entertainment or educational value of the material.

By dint of catering to a particular niche within the bookish community and already having a positive public image, Reese garners the most attention from people who would be supportive of or neutral towards her mission. Though her feedback has primarily been positive, Reese, admittedly, has not gone the past five-plus years without catching a modicum of flack for her enterprise. However, the little criticism she has received is not against the literary quality of

the books she is selecting or her validity in recommending them. One such instance was when she selected *The Nightingale* by Kristen Hannah, which, while not itself controversial, led to Reese receiving backlash from readers because she spoke of choosing the novel in response to rising antisemitism; however, the author was not Jewish, and the holocaust is not the central plot. Additionally, the husband of *Where the Crawdads Sing's* author, Delia Owens, was accused of murder, bringing increased attention to the book, though this did not lead to the cancellation of either Owens or Witherspoon. While not everyone enjoys the types of books Reese recommends, there is not a large market for her ridicule, either. Reese has capitalized on a desire for women, in particular, to be given recommendations of books that appeal to them and meet them where they are. Reese selects books primarily to entertain, and her mission, empowering women, is noble, but it is not at all divorced from financially empowering one woman above all: herself.

Reading the Romance: Women's Lit and Publishing

Though published in the 1980s, middlebrow and women's literature scholar Janice Radway's seminal work, *Reading the Romance*, gives us important context through which to view the choices of Reese's Book Club. Her book focuses on her case study of a group of women living in Smithton—a small Midwestern town—whose primary source of entertainment is romance novels. Radway conducted many interviews with Dot, the defacto ringleader of the women's recommendation network, and the women who frequented the bookstore at which she worked to get her reading suggestions to determine the appeal of such novels for their group. She found that major reasons for the women's reading included escapism, particularly from the unseen labor of housework, relaxation, learning about other places, and having an activity just

for them (Radway 61). While such women were often looked down on for reading primarily romances, they had an indisputably significant impact on book sales and, indeed, themselves looked down upon books they considered overly sexual rather than proper romantic stories. When justifying the reading habits of the Smithton woman, Dot says, "'I believe this is good therapy and much cheaper than tranquilizers, alcohol or addictive T.V. serials which most of my readers say bores them'" (Radway 52). She describes romance books as an alternative to more weighty vices, also using the language of therapy that grew to be associated with Oprah's Book Club. She still acknowledges that books can be addictive and pricy but portrays them as a healthier thing to spend money on. Many of the women reported feeling that they had to hide their reading habit from their husbands, who disdained the practice, particularly when the man was the household's primary breadwinner. In the past four decades, we have seen substantial shifts in attitudes and practices surrounding women and their reading habits. For example, the Smithton women were adamant that what they were reading was not porn, but many digital book communities today delight and find empowerment in explicitly sexual literature written by and for women. In 2018, Reese chose a novel called *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, describing it with the fire emoji—indicating that it contains smut—and does not seem to have a problem choosing books that feature sexual scenes. Additionally, RBC strongly encourages the sharing of what members are reading rather than seeing it as a shameful or private act. And, while the literal act of reading a book is private, showing others what you read—or claim to read—has shifted drastically to become the norm.

Monetization of Reese's Book Club

While the field of literary studies may not yet have noticed Reese's impact, her overall success in the business realm is unignorable. While Reese is seen primarily as an actress, her work off-screen has led her to become what Forbes calls the wealthiest actress in the world, with a net worth of almost half a billion dollars (Forbes). Her production company, Hello Sunshine, has created a pipeline that allows Reese to—within the bounds of her mission—profit and promote herself and her chosen few at every stage of the process. Since Reese's only self-imposed guideline on which book to select each month is that it is by and about women, it is unclear the extent to which her selections are chosen for their nebulous value to readers versus the ability to potentially be adapted by Hello Sunshine. While most RBC picks are not turned into movies or TV shows, over ten percent are in the works or already exist. The data as to what percentage of books that are published in America are turned into adaptations does not readily exist, but considering the number of new books published is likely several hundred thousand, and, as the numbers on TV and film releases tend to be in the hundreds, this conversion rate is impressive.

Not only does Reese cut a deal with her chosen authors, which gives her the power to produce the adaptation should she so choose but she also has multiple direct sources of revenue through the club. For one, her website, reesesbookclub.com, has a "Shop" section (shop.reesesbookclub.com), which opens in a new tab and is hosted separately from the main site. This site sells boxes with the book for the month along with snacks and bookish tchotchkes in a tote bag, as well as affiliate links to the items in RBC's holiday gifting guide. In addition to selling the books she picks and acquiring their rights, the broader book club has garnered some additional income streams, both as brand collaborations and sponsorships. Of the former, the

one that has gotten the most attention is the aforementioned Buick deal, though it was far from the last. Sheraton hotels have partnered with Hello Sunshine as part of an "experiences" initiative in their lobbies. Select hotel entries will have popup libraries featuring many of Reese's top picks, along with ample aesthetic backgrounds and seating to encourage gathering amongst readers ("Sheraton hotels"). The companies Reese collaborates with say a lot about how she views her audience and chooses to capitalize upon them, implying that many of the people participating in the club are upper class. She also has many shorter-term sponsorships, though these still appear selective, whether through explicit sponsors or affiliate links. While it is clear Reese does not mind mixing work and play, the recommended products for which she is getting some compensation are denoted by an asterisk or listed as a newsletter partnership. Reese's popularity pre-RBC allowed the club to gain momentum and garner high-quality corporate partners quickly. The collaborations with well-known brands surely increased the club's overall recognition. It is a win for everyone involved—though arguably most so for those with the most resources, like Hello Sunshine and its collaborators—including the club's members, who are encouraged to share their own social media posts of aesthetic bookish materials.

Conspicuous Consumption: Book Club Edition

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorsten Veblen describes the then-rising phenomenon of conspicuous consumption, in which the accumulation of material wealth in the form of possession of value becomes as much or more important than having money. Those with power and status influence the consumption of goods that are seen as desirable, causing others also to value the acquisition of such things. He says, "Since the consumption of these more

excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit." To consume properly is a never-ending cycle, particularly for those trying to proverbially keep up with the Joneses or having a lower socioeconomic status. As the role of women in society has undoubtedly shifted from Veblen's time, the niche that Reese's Book Club fills was explicitly created to elevate traditionally stifled or ignored voices. We can see a cult of personality fed by the amateur enjoyment of books manifested in this consumption—and, often, overconsumption—and sharing of bookish materials. This, through the use of material goods, particularly when shared digitally, aids in allowing those inclined to portray the image that they read lots of books.

> Pretty much all that is here insisted on is that, as regards these amenities of life, the housewife's efforts are under the guidance of traditions that have been shaped by the law of conspicuously wasteful expenditure of time and substance…The more reputable, "presentable" portion of middle-class household paraphernalia are, on the one hand, items of conspicuous consumption, and on the other hand, apparatus for putting in evidence the vicarious leisure rendered by the housewife.

While much of Veblen's theory centers on "the gentleman of leisure," he also discusses the role of housewives. He portrays women as particularly susceptible to the machinations of the system of acquiring goods that give off their desired image. Additionally, the language surrounding his descriptions of women's consumption is more negative, whereas when describing men, he states that the phenomenon is "human nature." When Veblen was writing, a housewife's consumption was fueled by her husband's work, and it was productive to the family's image if it showed how she was able to spend her time on leisure. Reading for many women now is seen as a form of

escapism, as demonstrated in Radway's *Reading the Romance*, and, until more recently, as something to keep private rather than to share with strangers on the internet. But, as Veblen noted, the power of inertia is strong, and once a habit of consumption is formed, it is easy to feed.

Computational Analysis: Reasoning

To further study Reese's Book Club, I employ computational methods to assess the extent to which the books selected compare to existing perceptions of the literary middlebrow. Additionally, I reflect on how these results speak to the club's self-image and the public's views towards RBC. The Digital Humanities is a growing field within literary studies that seeks to mix academic disciplines to see what can be gained through a different kind of study (Piper). Past studies of the literary middlebrow have included case studies, interviews, and close readings, for example, Radway's account of the Book of the Month Club by visiting their office in New York and interviewing the employees, or her assay to a small, Midwestern town to interview a network of romance readers (Radway). Due to the digital nature of RBC's network of readers and Witherspoon's celebrity, any in-person investigation would prove infeasible. Thus, I decided to turn to the same tools that support the infrastructure of RBC by performing computational analyses of data available on the books chosen for the club from its beginning up through November of 2023.

Examining data generated from over six years of monthly selections, I explore a series of questions I have about the macroscopic trends of the book choices. I am particularly interested in this broader type of investigation because of the careful language used in marketing the club that stipulates the only criterion for chosen books is that a woman writes them. Is it the case that

the books have little connection between them, or are there threads of similarity? In the following analysis, I compute the extent of the diversity of RBC choices, both in the types of books selected and in the representation of authors of different backgrounds. Additionally, I will look at the fates of the books, vis-à-vis their selection timeline and whether they have been made into an adaptation. I also examine the similarities between the language used to describe the various books. While lots of data around these books exist, a perennial problem in examining book-related data is decentralization, so a large part of the effort will include constructing the pieces of information I desire into a standardized format.

Computational Analysis: Results

To analyze the 78 books chosen for Reese's Book Club as of November 2023—not including the occasional young adult supplementary selections—I created a dataset primarily using the list provided on the club's website and book-specific information on Goodreads. I collected the month and year the book was chosen for RBC along with the title, author, publication year, genre, whether it has a TV or movie adaptation created or planned, the Goodreads summary[1], and number of pages of the most popular edition. Since Goodreads allows books to be tagged with multiple genres, I selected the first descriptive one, for example, choosing "memoir" even if "nonfiction" was the first tag. I contend several of these books could be placed into multiple genres, so I attempted to ascertain which one it was primarily marketed as. I used the Python programming language in Jupyter Notebooks, an IDE (Integrated Development Environment) often used for data analysis that generates visuals to analyze this dataset. Using this data, I analyzed the book selections as a group to better understand the club

[1] Each book has a single summary of comparable length, typically a couple of short paragraphs, that was used to create a corpus of book summaries for the full collection of books.

more quickly and holistically than reading each of the dozens of choices. While computational methods cannot provide perfect evaluations of textual data, nor can humans, and these quantitative analyses contribute to qualitative, literary assessments, perhaps confirming or challenging conceptions of the data collection I have set out to examine.

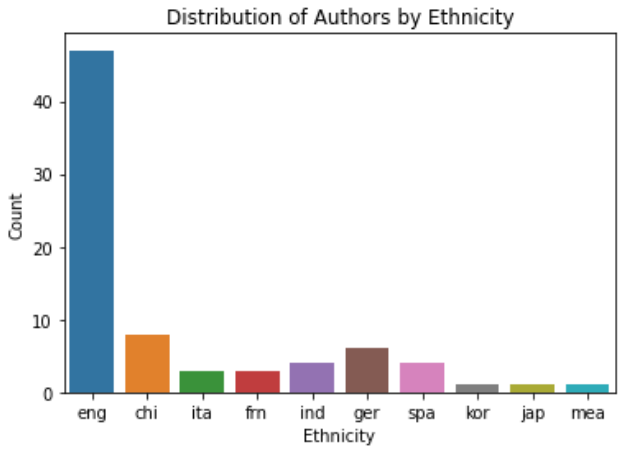

Figure 1: Graph of RBC authors by predicted ethnicity

Considering that 95% of American fiction was published by white authors between 1950 and 2018, ending at 89% in the latter year, Reese's authorial picks are significantly more diverse than industry standards (So and Wezerek). Using a Python library that detects an individual's probable ethnicity based on their name, drawing from data tagging known pairs, I analyzed the spread of authors whom Reese has picked. For my purposes, a drawback of this library is the limited ethnicities on which it was trained, so the shown graph reflects these inaccuracies.[2] For example, I can identify several of the authors whose books Reese chose as having African descent, but the Python package was not trained on these names and thus misidentified those writers. Additionally, data for each author's ethnicity is not always available, so a human-based assessment would also be based on heuristic-based last name designations—which can also be inaccurate, particularly when women take their partner's surname upon marriage. Regardless, this rudimentary classification shows that while a majority of authors are perceived to be of English descent, over a third are not, and there is a good spread

[2] The model is trained on the following ethnicities: Middle-Eastern, Chinese, English, French, Vietnam, Spanish, Italian, German, Japanese, Russian, Indian, and Korean.

of authors from other backgrounds, many of which are traditionally non-white, such as Chinese, Hispanic, and Indian.

To now turn from the authors to their works, we can see some clear patterns emerge when looking at the genres for each of Reese's book choices. The top categories are historical fiction, thrillers, romance, and literary fiction, with a handful of other choices in other genres. The categories that most frequently come up—save for literary fiction—are largely those associated with women's literature. They follow a rough Zipfian curve, wherein the top few categories hold the bulk of the data, and the least frequent categories have very few items in them. Even the presence of a definable, familiar genre is indicative of a book that is decidedly not highbrow. It is important to note that the graph represents the primary genres of the books—as indicated by their Goodreads pages. When compiling the dataset and examining individual books, there is an observable trend of cross-genre selections. Many of the books in RBC had

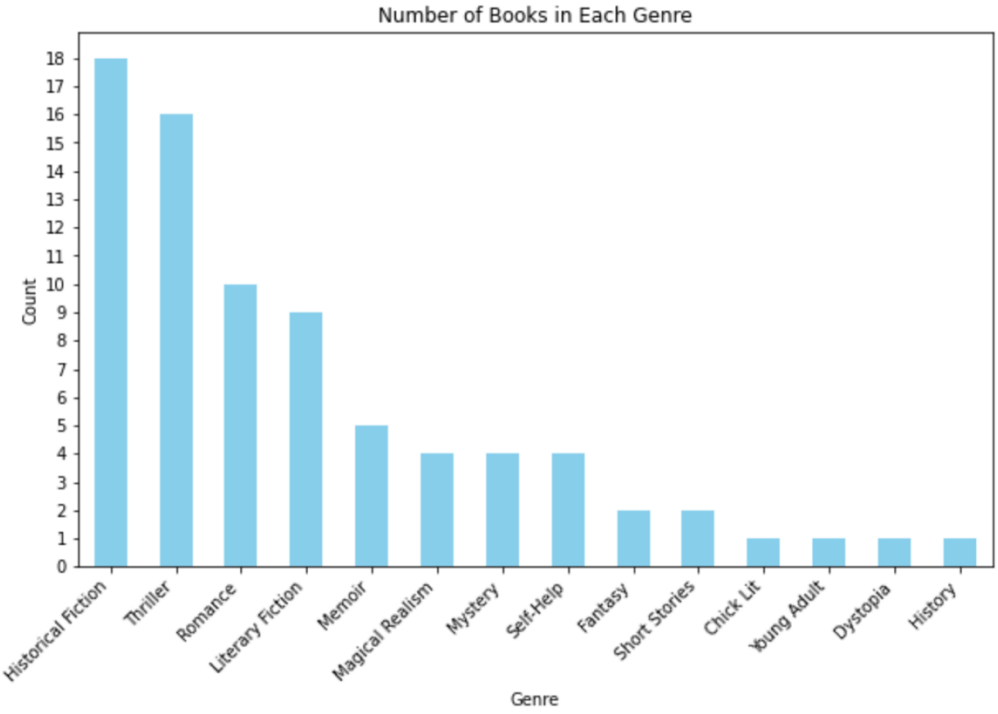

Figure 2: Graph of genre counts for RBC books

several genre tags; whether this is a factor of Goodread's genre tagging mechanism or more specific to the choices Reese makes could warrant further investigation.

When examining the temporal discrepancy between a book's publication date and the year in which Reese chose it for the club, only five books were chosen two or more calendar years after the one in which they were published—and just a dozen were chosen the year after. Overall, books were chosen quite quickly after publication, perhaps to capitalize on their trendiness and contribute to Reese's authority in recommending the hottest new books. Looking at the average lengths of the RBC books, we can see that they have a mean length of 340.44

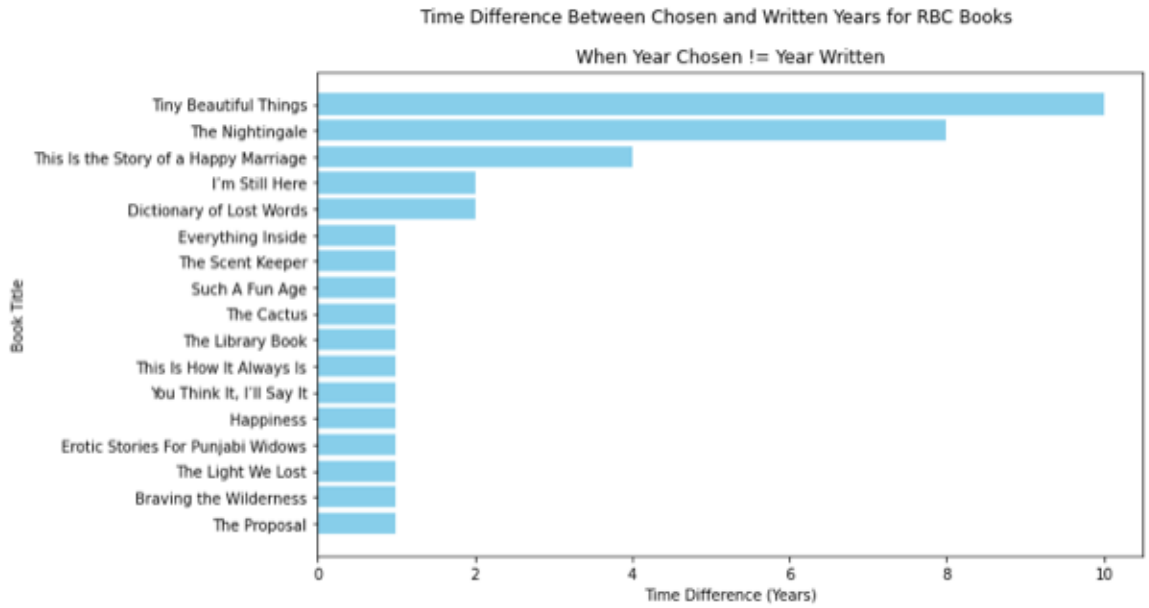

Figure 3: Visualization of RBC books selected after the calendar year in which they were published

pages, a median of 336, and a standard deviation of 57.22. This high standard deviation—or the average amount a data point varies from the mean—indicates that the average is not particularly representative of any one book. However, the spread of the data is primarily clustered around the 300-400 page range with few quite very long or short books. The data are clustered in a Bell

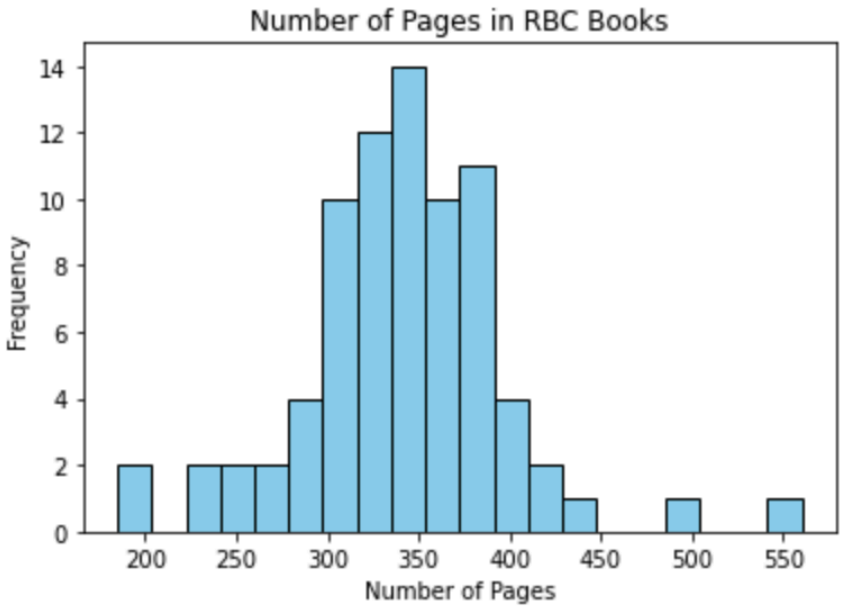

Figure 2: Histogram of page counts in RBC books

curve, suggesting a normal distribution. Though the majority of the books chosen have not been made into adaptations—though if Reese is producing most of them that are, that might prove somewhat difficult—several have been, and to great success. Overall, the data supports that Witherspoon's book club choices align with critical facets of the middlebrow: entertainment value and profitability.

On such a small dataset, traditional topic modeling—in the sense of having a model identify discrete themes that occur in a corpus—would not be possible without having the full texts of each book, which, due to copyright laws and the recency of the publication of these

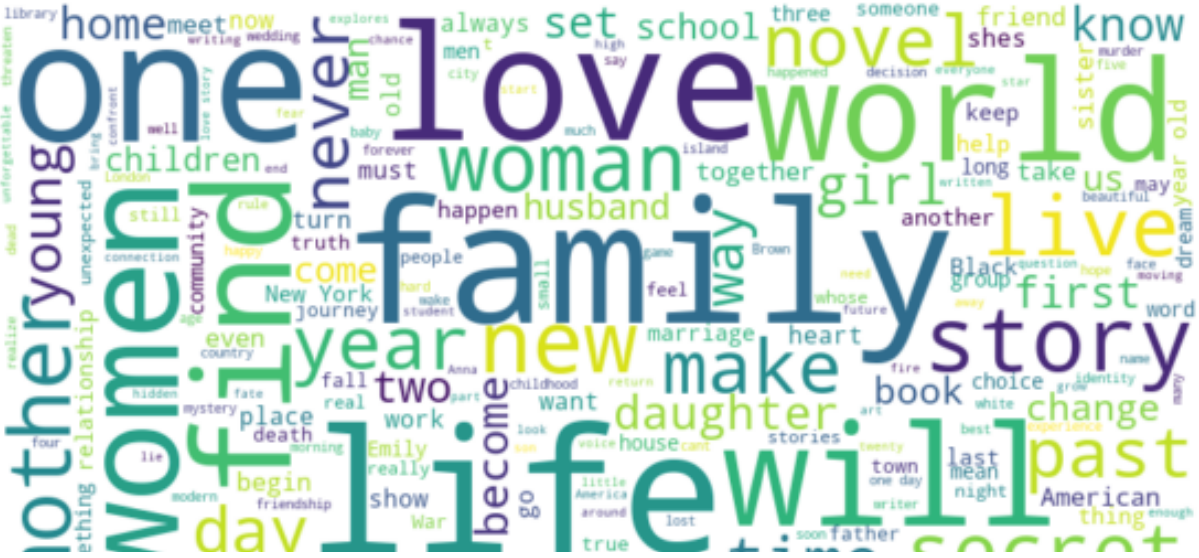

Figure 3: Word cloud of common terms in RBC books' Goodreads summaries

books, would be infeasible for this project. Instead, I created a word cloud to display the most frequently appearing words in the Goodreads book descriptions. Common stopwords—words and partial words that tend not to be of use in lexical analysis, such as "the," "and," or the back half of contractions—were removed before generating the cloud, as is standard procedure. The largest—most common—words are family, love, and life, each of which is typically associated with women's literature—indeed, "woman" is another top word. Still quite frequent words like "one," "find," and "will" give the impression of association with a thriller or mystery. Some other words or phrases that are specific enough to merit attention include "New York," "Black," and "Brown." The former of these supports the middlebrow tendency of NYC-centricity, and the latter two quantify the sense of importance RBC places on diverse literature. This word cloud and the other forms of computational analysis I chronicled provide quantitative backing for general ideas concerning the books chosen for Reese's Book Club.

And the Winner is…

To select the first book on which to perform literary close reading, I used computational methods to narrow the large pool down. I aimed to choose a book that would be one of the most representative of the club's selections. I used the heuristic of how similar the Goodread's summaries of each book compared semantically to the corpus comprised of all the books' summaries. First, I calculated the cosine similarity of each book summary compared to the corpus and ranked them from most to least similar. Cosine similarity provides a numeric measure, as a proportion of one, of how similar two documents are by vectorizing—changing words into representative numbers—them and comparing the overlap not simply in denotative word matches but in the overall semantic meaning. Length is not a factor since connotation is

compared, so summaries slightly shorter than others would not be penalized for that specifically. From this ranking, I filtered out the top five scores, representing the books whose summaries are most similar to the corpus of all summaries.

	Month of Selection	Year of Selection	Book Title	Author Name	Publication date	Genre	Adaptation?	Goodreads Summary	# of pages	Cosine Similarity
19	January	2019	The Library Book	Susan Orlean	2018	History	No	On the morning of April 29, 1986, a fire alarm...	317	0.192610
77	November	2023	Maybe Next Time	Cesca Major	2023	Magical Realism	No	One Day meets Groundhog Day, in this heartwarm...	384	0.184341
66	December	2022	The Marriage Portrait	Maggie O'Farrell	2022	Historical Fiction	No	The author of award-winning Hamnet brings the ...	335	0.182978
2	August	2017	The Lying Game	Ruth Ware	2017	Thriller	No	From the instant New York Times bestselling au...	370	0.182237
15	September	2018	Where the Crawdads Sing	Delia Owens	2018	Historical Fiction	Yes	For years, rumors of the "Marsh Girl" haunted ...	384	0.181602

Figure 5: Database output of top 5 most similar books

I further filtered the results from this list to a single representative book. I decided to read a book from one of the top three genres of the dataset, either Historical Fiction, Thriller, or Romance. This eliminated two choices: *Maybe Next Time* by Cesca Major and *The Library Book* by Susan Orlean, Magical Realism and History books, respectively. Of the remaining three—*The Marriage Portrait* by Maggie O'Farrell, *The Lying Game* by Ruth Ware, and *Where The Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens—each was selected in the same year as it was published and had a page count within one standard deviation of the average—both factors indicative of the average—so to pick one of the three, I consulted the list of books that Reese deems readers' favorites to narrow the field, which is sent as part of the welcome to the club upon subscribing to the email list. This left me with *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, which has also been made into an adaptation and reached significant commercial success in part due to Reese's influence.

The Booby Prize

	Month of Selection	Year of Selection	Book Title	Author Name	Publication date	Genre	Adaptation?	Goodreads Summary	# of pages	Cosine Similarity
17	November	2018	The Other Woman	Sandie Jones	2018	Thriller	No	A deliciously disturbing, compulsively readabl...	304	0.108546
47	May	2021	The Last Thing He Told Me	Laura Dave	2021	Thriller	Yes	A woman searching for the truth about her husb...	320	0.098843
65	November	2022	Tiny Beautiful Things	Cheryl Strayed	2012	Self-Help	Yes	An anniversary edition of the bestselling coll...	400	0.098096
73	July	2023	Yellowface	R.F. Kuang	2023	Thriller	No	Athena Liu is a literary darling and June Hayw...	336	0.092745
0	June	2017	Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine	Gail Honeyman	2017	Literary Fiction	Planned	No one's ever told Eleanor that life should be...	390	0.069777

Figure 6: Database output of top five least similar books

To select a second book from the RBC collection to contrast with *Where the Crawdads Sing,* I returned to the cosine similarity data but looked at the opposite end of the list. Using the same metric as for identifying the most representative books, the five least representative were found to be *The Other Woman* by Sandie Jones, *The Last Thing He Told Me* by Laura Dave, *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed, *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang, and *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman. Since the average RBC book has yet to be made into an adaptation, I decided to eliminate the three in this list that have already or are planned to be made into one, leaving *Yellowface* and *The Other Woman*. These two books are similar in page number, genre, and the time between publishing and selection, so I looked at the similarity score. While the five most similar books all had similarity scores within about one percentage point of each other, there is slightly more variance on this end of the list. Since *The Other Woman* has a score of 0.109 and *Yellowface* has one of 0.093, I selected the latter for close reading as the most dissimilar to the collection at large. In the following chapter, I will perform a literary comparative close reading of *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens and *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang.

Chapter 2: The Romance of Reading

In the past several years, Reese's Book Club has selected a multitude of books to stamp with Witherspoon's approval, many of which contain threads of the bookishness described in Chapter 1 that can give us a sense of their relationship to all that is literary. As we saw previously, we can derive several data points from these picks to learn more about the sample at large. To explore with a greater degree of granularity the breadth of choices, in this chapter, I will perform a comparative close reading of *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, a book that is one of the most representative of the sample of all RBC books, and *Yellowface* by R. F. Kuang, which is one of the statistically least representative. Working under the idea that Witherspoon's choices tend towards the middlebrow, I will determine how closely each novel aligns with factors that contribute to this category to identify what makes an outlier to the dataset in terms of literary merit—and, in the process, what makes a typical choice. Through this analysis, I examine broader themes of the book club and the extent to which they are present in both novels to better understand the types of books Witherspoon endorses.

In this, I wish to understand how each novel romanticizes the notions of reading and the broader implications of the meaning associated with books. The content posted by Reese's Book Club aligns with Pressman's definition of bookishness; it encourages a lifestyle in which books are seen as essential, and the desired aesthetic furthers this idea. Books are an object of love for RBC, and women's literature is canonically associated with romantic love—and, increasingly in recent times, with female friendship—so investigating these themes in the books will show what the microcosm can tell us about the broader macrocosm. To see how deeply these ideas are embedded in the club and contemporary women's literature, I will examine their presence or absence in the two books I am close reading. One point of inquiry will be the books'

protagonists' relationships with others and how much they match an idealized model. Additionally, I will explore the impacts of monetary and literary success as they relate to broader ideas of the publishing industry. To further explore their mindsets and how romantic of a view they have on how the world works, I look at how the characters resolve issues and deal with external strife. Lastly, I will look into intertextuality in the novels as it relates to the romance surrounding the practice of reading to determine the extent to which the RBC-related fascination with all that is bookish extends to the books the club's members are reading. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that reading *Where the Crawdads Sing* and *Yellowface* in unison shows the shift towards increased artifice and rigmarole surrounding the publishing of literature, which seeps into the entire ecosystem of books and reading that distracts from the books themselves and turns attention and feelings towards the publishing structures surrounding them.

Love Story (Kya's Version)

Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens is a book that a reader can tell—from its cover to its content—makes sense to be chosen for a women's book club. But why is this the case? To first look at the basics, this novel was published in 2018 by G.P. Putnam's Sons and was turned into a movie soon thereafter, produced in part by Hello Sunshine. It was selected for RBC in September of the year in which it was published. *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a historical fiction about Kya—otherwise known as the Marsh Girl—who lives in rural coastal North Carolina. It is formatted in a split narrative between Kya's childhood growing up as the town outcast and a murder trial in which she is the key suspect during her twenties. The point of view is third person limited, with a non-character narrator telling the story with a focus on what happens to Kya, occasionally providing the reader with snippets of her direct thoughts. Abandoned in the

marsh as a child by her family, Kya had no formal education and was forced to support herself in offbeat ways, such as by collecting mussels and selling them to a Black man, Jumpin', who ran a gas, bait, and tackle shop in town. Kya is literally and figuratively put on trial for her actions, both because of a murder accusation and due to her failure to conform to the norms of her milieu. Over the years, she had relationships with two men from town, Tate and Chase. The former taught Kya to read when she was an illiterate teenager, yet he abandoned her when he went off to college at UNC-Chapel Hill. However, he later redeems himself by helping her become an author and illustrator of biological reference books of the marsh and becomes her life partner. Chase, who pursued a secret relationship with Kya after Tate went to college—while simultaneously being engaged to another woman—is found dead near the fire tower and the Marsh Girl is the primary suspect. Although Kya was ostensibly in Greenville to meet with her editor at the time of her death, it took a lot of convincing to prove her innocence. However, in the end, the reader realizes that the townsfolk may have been partially correct about Kya. After the trial, Kya is able to forgive Tate and rekindle their earlier relationship. *Crawdads* has a plot that pulls at the readers' emotions but ultimately leaves them with a satisfying, clear-cut ending.

Kya's central relationship in the novel is that of romantic connection initiated through the power of literature. When Kya is a teenager, Tate observes that she collects feathers and other natural specimens from the marsh and uses this fact to condition her into trusting and liking him. He leaves her rare feathers and gifts on a tree stump, piquing her curiosity that another person is showing her attention and kindness. She understands the relations of humans through the lives of the wildlife she observes around her. "She stood absolutely still, trying to take it in, what it meant. She had watched male birds wooing females by bringing them gifts. But she was pretty young for nesting" (Owens 97). The narrator shows Kya's deep knowledge of the natural world

that she has gleaned through praxis and directly metaphorizes this to what is happening to her vis-à-vis people. Kya knows she is human yet feels a stronger affinity to the wildlife surrounding her, as shown by this comparison. Once Tate successfully woos Kya into trusting him enough to share a conversation, he offers to teach her to read, and she accepts. Tate was intrigued by Kya romantically, so he identified her need to have a means of furthering her studies of nature. This allowed him to successfully facilitate their relationship by meeting her where she was and building her literacy through subjects that interest her, like plants and animals. Unlike most townspeople, he saw intellectual potential in her and tried and succeeded to cultivate it. That is not to say his intentions were wholly to contribute to the greater good; Tate finds Kya attractive and rightly guesses that attention is one of the things in which she is most lacking (Owens 98). In their small ecosystem, Tate acts as arbiter of education for Kya, influencing what she learns and fostering positive feelings toward him. At the same time, he receives her company and adoration in return, deepening his passion for biology through seeing her thirst for learning.

Literacy is a powerful force, just as love is; indeed, the two are inextricably intertwined. After Kya reads her first sentence and is mesmerized by the power that words can hold, Tate says, "'You can read, Kya. There will never be a time again when you can't read'" (Owens 103). He describes literacy as a transformational experience, separating her life into two sections, before and after being able to read—which, uncoincidentally, coincides with before and after meeting him. No matter what happens to her and how much others try to tear her down, no one can take that ability away from her. Not only does the power of reading allow Kya to foster a relationship with another human after her family abandons her, but this relationship affords her the confidence to use the form of the book to become a producer of the biological guides on

which she cultivated her passion for the natural world. And, in the end, she can have it all: the man, her success, and her passions. When Tate and Kya rekindle their relationship after the drama of the trial, they continue to find connection in their deep intellectual bond over biology. Kya's house is covered in the specimens she collects and her drawings and paintings of the natural phenomena in the marsh. By the time she passes away at the end of the book and Tate must pack up her possessions, it is clear that reading changed her life in many ways beyond providing her with literacy.

Throughout Kya's life, the written word allows her to travel beyond the borders of her secluded milieu while simultaneously deepening her connections with it. When the latent naturalist in Kya is unlocked, she is given the means to study her surroundings, eventually to the extent where she is prolific enough in the field to become an honorary doctorate recipient from UNC-Chapel Hill. However, she only becomes a published author—and, indeed, a competent reader—with Tate's help. After he went to college, he broke his promise to come back and visit her, not returning to her marsh for several years. Kya is initially unwilling to forgive him, but eventually, she allows herself to take his advice and send samples of her seashell artwork to a publisher. While she may not fully trust Tate again, Kya knows he has knowledge of the world beyond the marsh, which she lacks. By publishing her illustrated guidebooks on the wildlife of the North Carolina seaboard, Kya enables her lifestyle to continue without the grand struggles she experienced growing up and without anyone to provide for her. Ultimately, her success as an author would allow her to live comfortably on her own for the rest of her life; however, the feelings fostered for Tate over her teens and his continued remorse and apologies for leaving her led Kya to take him back eventually. Her relationship with him is rife with positive feedback loops; he starts by bringing her feathers, teaches her how to read and learn, and enables her to

publish books. Their partnership has a symbiosis and allows Kya to eventually become a producer of the content that Tate mediated for her in their teens. While rooted in naturalism, their bond is broadly indicative of the happy-ending type of relationship associated with the middlebrow. Kya may be fiercely independent, but she can feel lonely like other humans and yearns for intimacy and connection.

Kya uses her romance with Tate as a means of learning how publishing operates, yet both she and the reader are afforded a rather quixotic perspective on how a book is brought into being. Living in the marsh, Kya is out of the loop as to how books are created and circulated. She has a bible at home and whatever old schoolbooks Tate brought her to study. She eventually becomes aware of the public library a town over and gains access to a plethora of tomes through the regional network, astounded by what she can get her hands on, and surprising the librarians by what types of books she is curious about. As an astute self-taught naturalist and artist, Kya makes illustrations and collects samples of the wildlife surrounding her home out of passion, but she never would have thought to try to monetize this endeavor until Tate brought publishing her work. Even then, it takes her a while to come around to the idea of navigating the unfamiliar outer world and finding an editor for her works. The novel portrays the process simplistically: Kya sends out her samples to a publisher, and they accept her outright, sending an advance via check. As *Crawdads'* author—Delia Owens—has published several biological nonfiction books, the reader is left to trust that she portrays this slice of the literary world—though that of the past—with some degree of accuracy. It seems the publishing industry is just a whisper in the wind of *Where the Crawdads Sing;* we may wonder whether that is by dint of the pre-internet times or a desire for Owens not to soil her own nest.

This novel does not go into depth as to the impact and interworkings of a book deal, following the middlebrow trend of unselfconsciousness. Kya does not seem to experience any corruptive influences from the money her guidebooks bring in, despite it bringing a monumental increase to her quality of life. This change is salient; towards the beginning, we see Kya scavenging for mussels to make enough money to buy herself grits, and we feel for her when Jumpin' has already purchased enough for the day and she goes home empty-handed. However, as is persistent throughout the novel, books have incredibly strong powers, and by creating her own, she can continue the cycle of education that so helped her when Tate taught her how to read. As Kya's guidebooks are published, Jumpin'—an unlikely father-figure proxy once her biological dad departs—proudly displays them in the window of his shop, one by one, as they are published and everyone ages. Her drawings and specimens are treated with deference as they are sent off for further posthumous study. The physicality of paper books and tangible materials gives heft to their ideas and places an authority on the words. It is implied that the resulting monetary success is a result of the merit of the work rather than any outside forces—particularly because Kya has so little influence from the outside world, her only points of contact being Tate, Jumpin', any other people she encounters if she goes into town, and the books she chooses to read. Kya receiving a copy of her first book in the mail is a monumental experience. "Now in her hands, the final copy—every brushstroke, every carefully thought-out color, every word of natural histories, printed in a book…She touched the pages and remembered each shell and the story of finding it…A family album" (Owens 217). Her thoughts show a deep reverence towards the printed page, the significance of the collection magnified by her connection to every entry in it. The language suggests that only the absolute necessities are included in the collection, and an

immense amount of thought is put into its careful curation. Around her illustrated guidebooks, there is no artifice, only the impressively detailed artwork found within.

For Kya, creating—with illustrations or words—is an important act, regardless of whether her work receives much recognition or a positive impression. After Kya dies, Tate discovers that Kya wrote regionally published poetry under a pen name and never told anyone about it, not even him, her closest connection. "Through the years she must have put the poems in the rusty mailbox, submitting them to local publications…Perhaps a reaching out, a way to express her feelings to someone other than the gulls. Somewhere for her words to go" (Owens 366). This quote shows Kya's latent humanity and shift from relying on nature alone, implying that words give her a way to connect to others outside the natural world. Kya's act of secretly sending poems away to contests shows the deep love she has for writing for the sake of doing it, even if her words are not attributed to her. She got pleasure out of the process of making art that pleased her, not from other people knowing that she was the one who made it. In the historical universe of Barkley Cove, the internet is far, far away, and word of mouth is the most potent currency. While Kya's main works, her collections of nature drawings and paintings, are easily published due to their high quality, there is little talk as to their reception in the broader world, but beyond the fact they allow Kya to live comfortably, this doesn't faze her. She can't imagine caring deeply about the opinions of the people who were mean to her and shut her out because of her eccentricities.

Throughout *Where the Crawdads Sing,* Kya is perpetually othered, yet she is able to overcome this and develop a small number of meaningful relationships outside of traditional metrics of social success. Her family, before they abandoned her, were seen as white trash since they lived separately from the other folks in the area and behaved—particularly her father—in

uncouth ways. When they left her, one by one, the lore surrounding her wildness only grew, and since people saw her as fundamentally different than them, they saw no problem treating her as something less than human. At nineteen, Kya knows her reputation to be irrevocably cemented, "*Not much has changed,* she thought, *them laughing, me holing up like a sand crab*. A wild thing ashamed of her own freakish ways" (Owens 149). In this snippet, in which we see Kya's direct thoughts—rather than the narrator's mediation of them—she too uses a natural simile to liken her actions to that of an animal she has observed in the marsh. This is why, when she is accused of the murder of Chase, she initially decides not to fight back because she knows the townspeople have already formed their opinions about her. It is with the help of the local lawyer, Mr. Milton, who is able to control the narrative around the death of Chase Andrews, that Kya is released from custody as an innocent woman. She is never well-liked by her broader community. However, she comes to an understanding with the whole ordeal, finding solace in her relationship with Tate and not begrudging her differences:

> Feeling the *connections*. Not the connections Ma and Mabel had spoken of—Kya never had her troop of close friends, nor the connections Jodie described, for she never had her own family. She knew the years of isolation had altered her behavior until she was different from others, but it wasn't her fault she'd been alone. Most of what she knew, she learned from the wild (Owens 363).

The word "connections" is repeated in this quote to show its significance and how Kya's opinion of the meaning of relationships with other people has changed over time. The words hold a sense of acceptance, showing her self-awareness but lack of beguilement for how difficult her life was made through factors out of her control. There is a strong emphasis on how learning from the natural world gave Kya greater resilience toward dealing with the less enjoyable parts

of life. Kya's story shows a successful way of dealing with public ostracization, as she, while bullied and shunned as a child and young adult, was able to outgrow the narrative of the negative things that were said about her once she matured. She did not have to constantly feel like she was living in the wrong way because she could choose to tune out and ignore the voices that told her otherwise—again, perhaps due to the absence of the internet and technology in the book. And, the less attention she gave the voices, the quieter they spoke to her.

Authors have always made their careers by producing works others want to read and purchase, and *Where the Crawdads Sing* is no exception. Writers also tend to be consumers of literature themselves, as it is a profession that is not easy to succeed at, and they have a reputation of pursuing it to further their passion for the written word. Even though Kya only publishes nonfiction guidebooks under her name, she still profoundly appreciates literature, which guides how she sees the world and lives her life. Her inspiration and material come from her observations and are supported by what she learns from books. When Kya is waiting in the jailhouse for her trial to be resolved, she consoles herself with the words of Emily Dickinson.

> The sweeping up the heart,
> And putting Love away
> We shall not want to use again
> Until Eternity (Owens 299).

This poem is a curious choice for Kya to use in this situation since Dickinson's "The Bustle in a House" was written to describe feelings of mourning. However, in *Crawdads*, the words "sweeping" and "heart" are not capitalized, as in the original. This suggests a lack of emphasis on those terms, further adding importance to the ideas of "Love" and "Eternity," which are a latent thread in the book as they relate to both romantic connection and passion for the literary.

Perhaps, in this moment, Kya feels that all hope is lost and that the end is near. However, since she is also looking at the compass Tate gifted her, perhaps she is instead finding forgiveness in herself for her future life partner, locking away her heart until she knows for sure she can be with him again in perpetuity after the hopefully positive resolution of the case. Tate, comfortable enough with his masculinity to feel as such, is also a fan of poetry, and through their shared love of this and biology, the written word serves to further suffuse their relationship with meaning. The slow media of books and shorter writings, as well as the gradually changing scenery of the surrounding marsh, afford Kya, and eventually Tate, a very different sort of stimulatory situation than authors today receive, containing the major scandal surrounding Chase's death to a localized issue that can be resolved in a court of law, rather than one of public opinion.

When looking at scholarly definitions and conceptions of the classification, we can place *Where the Crawdads Sing* squarely within the middlebrow. Indeed, it hits all the eight factors of the category, as defined by Driscoll circa 2014. It is middle-class in that the characters within it must consider money in decisions as to what they can do, sometimes struggling to get by—though not to the point of discomfort for the reader. It centers on a woman and has a plot that pulls on a reader's emotions. The characters show deference towards highbrow literature, particularly poetry. The novel's issues are weighty, but it presents them in a way that still allows it to feel recreational to a reader—like something you could read without paying complete attention—and ends on a satisfyingly positive note. Additionally, through its mediation from Reese's Book Club, *Where the Crawdads Sing* has reached high levels of commercial success (Driscoll). In this, we can confirm qualitatively that the cosine-similarity-based analysis of the Goodreads descriptions of all books chosen for Reese's Book Club accurately identified a book that confirms overall conceptions of the Club's choices when considering them through the lens

of middlebrow and women's literature. However, Kya's story reminds us of the risk of making assumptions about the contents of something just from what it looks like on the outside. The townspeople come up with an idea about her because of the unfortunate circumstances in which she grew up, not changing their opinions until after she is acquitted of murder. Through this all, she remains steadfast in her beliefs, ultimately not letting their warped perception of her limit her potential. Kya is a multifaceted character, and while her story reflects broader trends in the types of books standard to RBC, we will soon see how vast the variation within the club can be.

Bad Romance: Reading Kuang's Yellowface

R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface*, a slightly more recent release and RBC selection of 2023, was published by HarperCollins and has similarly met commercial success and literary acclaim. However, it has not yet been adapted to the screen, though *Yellowface* has spurred a greater ecosystem of discourse surrounding its contents than *Where the Crawdads Sing*. It is a contemporary satire set in Washington, D.C., about June Song Hayward, a white female writer who attended Yale as an undergraduate and supported herself after college by counseling high school students on college admissions while working on her creative endeavors. Despite publishing her debut novel quickly out of college, she never met the same level of success as her classmate and frenemy, Athena Liu, publishing's veritable golden child. *Yellowface* is set in the first-person point of view, so the reader is afforded unfiltered access to Hayward's thoughts and must experience the story through her mediation. June has no love story in this novel; however, she has incredibly salient feelings for her late ostensible friend Athena. Tate acts as a sherpa to Kya, but Athena is more of an idol to June. While Liu dies early into the novel due to choking on a pancake when the girls are drinking in Athena's apartment, June's relationship with her is

able to develop in intriguing ways as the idea of Athena remains posthumously. Contrary to the central relationship of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, literature has a corrupting and negative influence on June's feelings towards Athena, which started neutral, if not friendly. June steals her unfinished manuscript of a novel about World War II from the Chinese perspective, *The Last Front,* and passes it off as her own after heavily editing it. Though she is initially able to keep up the ruse, after double-dipping from Athena's repertoire and basing another work on an idea of her late friend, June is in hot water again. While Kya is disliked for being who she is, June is disliked for pretending to be who she is not. Reputation destroyed, at the end of the book, the only way June can see out of the sticky situation in which she placed herself is to write a memoir cum novel to obscure the truth to the point of it being unrecognizable, which the reader can construe to be the text they just finished reading. While Owens shares many characteristics with her main character—being a biologist who published many nature guidebooks before her first novel—Kuang is explicitly different from her white anti-hero, June. Kuang can perhaps be construed as Athena, the quickly-killed-off yet omnipresent ultra-successful, "ambiguously queer" Asian-American author.

Our *Yellowface* protagonist, June, does not seem interested in romantic or sexual relationships throughout the long time we follow her. This, along with the younger demographic of characters within the novel, is a crucial indicator of *Yellowface's* deviation from typical middlebrow and women's literature themes. June met Athena freshman year at Yale and quickly got close. June confides in Athena about a potential sexual assault she experiences with an upperclassman boy—one of the few mentions of June having non-platonic relationships and perhaps an explanation as to why she does not pursue a traditional partnership—and Liu seems supportive until she uses the material as the seed of a story that is successfully accepted to a

prestigious undergraduate literary journal. The reader learns throughout the book that Athena is notorious for indiscriminately using anything people around her tell her or experience as free copy. Thus, later in the story, June feels okay reciprocating this behavior back to Athena postmortem, calling it "reparations, payback for the things that Athena took from me" (Kuang 39). June construes their relationship as transactional, allowing the personal and the literary to remain intertwined, though in a much more poisonous sense than in *Crawdads.* She invokes the language of antiracism in an odd manner to justify her plagiarism. While a rather tone-deaf way of putting it, June learns how to operate in the literary world by observing her more successful counterpart's strategies and attempting to rinse and repeat.

The trickiness of June's feelings toward Athena only grows more entangled postmortem. However, we get a small peek into how they interact with each other at the very beginning of the novel. While the girls often hung out, due to what June described as a friendship of convenience, she never seemed to much enjoy the relationship at the personal level. This time, though, they go back to Athena's apartment, and June seems to start to have a change of heart. She thinks, "I didn't realize it was possible to have so much fun with Athena. I've never been myself with her…in part because I'm nervous she'll realize I'm not half as brilliant or interesting as she thinks, and in part because of what happened freshman year (Kuang 16)." The use of many "I" pronouns is indicative of June's narration style, showing her self-centered modes of thinking. June also reveals her deep-seated resentment for Athena, which permeates all her actions throughout the book. June oscillates between resentment and nostalgia, wondering whether maybe Athena really was her best friend or if she was just a horrible person who stole ideas from other people. However, unlike Kya with Tate, she never can work out her frustrations in person and remains in perpetual flux. In a surprising turn of events toward the end of the book, June

thinks she is speaking to Athena's ghost and apologizes for everything. However, it turns out a bitter former assistant at her publisher is exacting revenge for June's role in her dismissal. June ends the book without anyone really on her side—no true friends, family members who do not understand the whole situation, and not a whiff of a significant other—her sour relationship with the contemporary publishing milieu spilling out into her personal life. There is no happy ending, as is often expected in middlebrow books aimed toward a feminine audience.

June had a romanticized idea of how publishing should work until she was proven sadly wrong. As a passionate and ostensibly talented young writer, she felt that she deserved to obtain literary success and financial remuneration. Nevertheless, reality does not reflect June's quixotic views, and as she sees Athena gain laurels and herself not, she adopts a more cynical view of the publishing industry. June reduces the issue to be squarely about race, seeing the sole difference in Athena's success and her initial lack thereof as a disadvantageous side effect of identity politics. While Kya understood what happened to her through the context of nature, June's most salient milieu is the internet, and her perceptions of reality are warped through this lens. She sees money as something that should come along when she produces good work. While June did not grow up wealthy, her idea of just getting by is working a non-prestigious, non-intellectual job after school. While without the money from *The Last Front*—the book she adapted from Athena's manuscript—June would not be destitute, similarly to Kya's advance, it is a way to afford our protagonists a protective cushion. However, Kya was not shown to succumb to any corruptive forces when her payout arrives. Kuang spends over a page detailing everything June spends her royalty money on: a new MacBook, an apartment, furniture, a liquor cabinet, student loans, and more. As June describes, "I've earned out. This means that I've sold enough copies to cover my already sizeable advance, and…I get to keep a percentage of all future sales" (93).

Throughout the book, June emphasizes the difficulty of becoming rich for authors, intimating that only a select few authors chosen by the publishing gods for whatever reason will be able to not only survive in the profession but be well off. Additionally, she spends time explaining concepts that are commonplace in publishing but may not be well-known by readers. As shown in the quote, though, these peeks into the cogs of the machine ultimately have a more self-serving purpose: they have underlying implications that reflect positively on June. Money changes her mindset, but it does not allow her to focus more on her work due to the guilt and worry about stealing Athena's work and the possibility of her being found out. Indeed, the success and pretense around the stolen novel make it even harder for her to do what she ostensibly really wants to do: write the great, original books she says to have within herself.

June describes the way publishing works in her understanding: it does not matter how good a book is—beyond a certain standard—but in how much the publishing house chooses to invest in marketing it, how it does on Goodreads, how Book Twitter responds to it, and a multitude of other factors, largely internet-based. This unfortunate reality shows that, once a contemporary writer understands this, it is impossible to remain infatuated with how the broader book production and dissemination systems work.

> But enter professional publishing, and suddenly writing is a matter of professional jealousies, obscure marketing budgets, and advances that don't measure up to those of your peers…You, not your writing, become the product…And once you're writing for the market, it doesn't matter what stories are burning inside you (256).

She juxtaposes the pretenses surrounding a book with its quality and the fact that a human being created it. She invokes the language of capitalism to deflate the intellectual endeavor that she sees writing as. June uses the word "professional" twice to drive home this point: writing is as

enmeshed in work politics as an office job, even when the dichotomy between low pay and high intellectual esteem is so stark. While there are many differences between our two protagonists' experiences with publishing successful books, the most notable is their milieu. While Kya's marsh and June's Ivy League education inarguably had immense impacts on the contents of their respective works, they also color how they see their individual successes. Kya is, frankly, just happy to have enough money to live the life she desires, including paying back taxes on her familial home that she would not have been able to do otherwise. June sees how other authors her age and around her—whether physically or in the Twitterverse—are doing, and because someone is always going to be making more money, getting more awards, and receiving more literary acclaim, she will never feel like she is doing well enough—not to mention the dubiously ethical processes in play that allowed her to reach the success she did. In June's world, the personal recognition surrounding a work is vital to cultivating a persona as an author-figure. June craves the approval of everyone who has an opinion in the online book milieu, regardless of how poorly they treat her when her time in the sun is up.

If *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a story of learning how to love oneself and others through the romance of reading, then *Yellowface* is an object lesson in the death of that romance. June can no longer get lost in a book because the business of books gets in the way of the parts that used to be magical. She lets her self-image be entirely contingent upon and warped by the opinions and critiques of others. The contemporary virtual community described by Kuang is right in line with Jon Ronson's description of our real world from his book about cancel culture *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, in which "Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sickening villain" (Ronson). As described by Ronson and experienced by June, the highs are incredibly high and the lows resoundingly low—the internet magnifies the incidents

chronicled on it. June, perhaps predictably so, faces several peaks and troughs of internet attention throughout the book—some good, some bad—that directly impact her mental state. She is accused of many things, some of them true, some false, and some just for the act of jumping on the bandwagon. At one point, before the real controversy surrounding the authorship of June's bestselling novel, she begins receiving some constructive criticism from a literary reviewer whom June likes the work of, that is, when she's tearing down *other* writers. June texts some fellow authors from her publishing house to commiserate, and one texts back, "Critics build an audience by dragging others down. It's the only way they can legitimize themselves. It's a toxic culture. Don't get pulled in. We're better than that" (Kuang 99). Her peers in publishing urge her not to listen to the haters who exist in their own echo chambers. This text uses short, snappy sentences to get the point across quickly. It creates a bit of irony, making the reader think about how this group chat of authors is doing something very similar to those tearing down June on social media, just in a way that complements their personal beliefs. However, as is apparent throughout the book, the people participating in online book communities directly impact how a novel performs and thus cannot be ignored. As information about June is released and pounced on, we see how quickly most people believe it, even when much remains unproven. By the end of the book, however, enough of the negative commentary around June is shown to be true when a bitter former assistant, Candice, at her publishing house traps her into revealing that she did steal chunks of Athena's work, she reaches a new low, reputation-wise. As June sees it, the contemporary author cannot afford to shout words into the wind, needing the oversharing of social media to curate just the right impression. She resolves to work to twist the unsavory narrative surrounding her in her favor by writing a book to shift the blame to others and raise questions as to what about Candice's story is problematic—in other

words, flip the script and hope enough people believe it to salvage her reputation. Because "some reviewer, somewhere, will give the book a closer look. They'll publish a contrarian review because editors who want clickbait always solicit contrarian reviews…The netizens who love to argue for the sake of arguing will look for holes" (Kuang 318-9). Again, we see June acting as a guide to the world of professional publishing and online book discourse. She professes to know exactly what will happen, but by this point in the book, we, the readers, know that obviously, this can't be the case when she is this deeply embroiled in controversy. However, the idea that in this—the age of endless content—there is always another point to contest, another drama to bring back up, because, in her view, the segment of the book community that controls who finds success places great import on the textual and video-based content that is produced to evaluate the works and authors that get attention will likely prove to be true.

June spends so much time online that she seems to lose sight of the bigger picture. Interestingly, June does not discuss what books she likes to read throughout *Yellowface*. When we see her read, the content is entirely of the online variety, and it seems to diminish her rather than provide fulfillment. When June is first accused of stealing Athena's work on Twitter by the latter's ex-boyfriend, she watches her fluctuating reputation in real time. "I can't move away from my laptop. Even when I finally get up to pee, my eyes remain glued to my phone. The healthy thing to do would be to shut down all my devices" (Kuang 136). June is self-aware of her toxic behaviors regarding her media diet, yet she cannot stop checking; she pathologically romanticizes the online. She describes how even catering to her bodily needs cannot be done without bringing along her small screen.

The few points in the book where we see June overcome with passion for the literary are still mediated by, at the very least, a laptop. When she performs her edits on Athena's unfinished

novel, *The Last Front*, she works day and night on her MacBook until she reaches a point of satisfaction. Similarly, when June realizes she must produce a new piece of work to restore her fluctuating reputation, using a snippet from a short story Athena workshopped as the seed for a novella, she again finds her inspiration in someone else's work. She doesn't read the classics or find inspiration in nature or her interactions with other people; it is strictly in the ideas of others that she finds her own. When she briefly moonlights as a writing instructor for teenagers at a workshop, it is much the same, and she has to stop herself before recycling their work into something of her own. During a brief trip home to visit her mother, she reflects on her shifting views about writing from her younger years to now.

> God, I miss my high school days, when I could flip my notebook open to an empty page and see possibility instead of frustration. When I took real pleasure in stringing words and sentences together to see how they sounded. When writing was an act of sheer imagination…of creating something only for me" (Kuang 256).

June very explicitly details the souring of her relationship with the act of writing. As a millennial woman in her mid-twenties, June grew up as the internet did, likely not having a substantial online presence until college. However, once these digital networks infiltrated the book world—and June's debut novel did not perform as well as she thought it deserved to—something changed in how she viewed the system. A deep cynicism, which had backing in her observations of how things like Twitter and Goodreads affected the perception and success of authors around her, pervaded her thoughts and poisoned her passion. She lost the thread of what made reading and writing so great—the art of entering a world beyond your own that can make you forget about all the less pleasant aspects of the real one—and began to join the digital universe instead. The internet also affords a warped view of reality, but rather than one of comfort and escape, as

fictional milieus often are, it makes her real-life markedly worse. Once she decided to enter the wardrobe into the digital literary community, June lost sight of the exit back home. The shift in her attention from the fictional world of books to the virtual world of the contemporary book community changes her romantic feelings toward books to the bitter ones one might feel for an ex-partner.

A book like *Yellowface* is one of personal reflection for a reader; while you are plopped into a new world, it is not one of escapism but of newfound existential dread. As a book—through the lens of June—it also serves as an intriguing exploration of the tension between commerciality and quality that has existed in the middlebrow. However, in this self-conscious reflection on its own literariness, *Yellowface* endeavors to move itself out of the category. June went to Yale for English but originally had to counsel high schoolers on their applications to similarly elite colleges, with the irony that her Ivy League education did not make her successful enough to subsist off of her writing alone. When speaking of the types of writing she wants to produce, June describes that "'Quirky, aloof, and erudite' is Athena's brand. 'Commercial and compulsively readable yet still exquisitely literary,' I've decided, will be mine" (42). This desired brand is middlebrow to a T, whereas Athena's style is decidedly highbrow. June points out common critiques of more literarily-inclined books to justify her middlebrow-ification of Athena's manuscript. June's decision to participate in the online bruhaha surrounding publishing means that she would have to go against the things she observes to make a book successful to place herself in a more highbrow bracket, as Athena was. However, June has no desire to opt-out. She sees the power that books chosen for celebrity book clubs—whether by Reese Witherspoon or, gasp, a Republican—have and wants that for herself. Her writing style is influenced by how she wants to be perceived but also by how she does not. She does not just

want what Athena had; she wants to be even more successful, which, in her definition, includes creating works that have more mass appeal. June says that Athena was called "a prodigy, a genius, the Next Big Thing, the voice of her generation" (Kuang 58). These signal the more highbrow nature of Athena's work, which June treats with some derision. She twists out the minor criticisms that Athena often got and works to remedy them in her writing. By writing a book like this, Kuang—based on the channels through which the novel was successful—is placing herself in a category that appeals to a broader audience—how much of that is because of the quality of writing and how much has to do with the scaffolding surrounding its publication could be put up to further debate while simultaneously trying to eschew many of the middlebrow norms that are common in books like *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

Together? It's Complicated

In summary, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, a book that my data suggest is very representative of the average RBC choice, provides a deep exploration of the timeless power of the written word. The main character, Kya, learns how to read through the context of falling in love and remains enamored by books for the rest of her life. She uses her newfound literacy to aid in her studies of the world around her, enabling a modest form of success for her books of illustrations that may not bring her fame but allow her to live a comfortable life and have a high level of respect in her field. When Kya faces ill will from those in her community, she is able to grow in maturity and cast off the malicious things said about her. Kya is also quite inclined toward the literary once she is given a chance to be and voraciously reads poetry and biological guidebooks, among other works. The overall novel conforms to prior definitions of the middlebrow and has also met newer metrics for success in its adaptation to film.

Yellowface, on the other hand, shows a bad romance with books, due to the overarching unsavory factors making the wheels of publishing turn. June, the protagonist, grew up loving reading and writing for its escapism but had her relationship with the literary sour as factors such as rivalries and internet-based judgments entered the picture. As June meets commercial success, the money and prestige afforded to her cloud her thoughts as to why she is doing this in the first place. However, when public opinion of her hits trough after trough, June cannot remove herself from the digital milieu that is the source of so much discontent. This leads her to consume more content surrounding reading and publishing than the books themselves. June takes no prisoners while she discusses the book world and gives an honest take as to what it takes to succeed and how her strategy of writing in a commercially successful yet literary way will set her apart. *Yellowface*, through examining the system in which it was created, works to cast aside the descriptions usually afforded to the middlebrow, yet has met success within the category.

While books like *Where the Crawdads Sing* are surely not meant to be mindless reading, *Yellowface*, in its dealing head-on with so many issues, has a broader chance for creating discourse and reflection on its contents. As Asian BookTuber withcindy—who is parodied in *Yellowface* for her analyses that call out problematic literature—notes in a video examining the book, Kuang missed an opportunity to consider a more intersectional critique of the publishing industry (withcindy). Kuang describes how BookTubers and other content creators online, from literary reviews to tweeters, thrive off of posting takes and takedowns. Cindy proves this point by producing a video much like her other ones; however, it feels like an essential follow-up to the book, as the themes are dissected by someone who shares a similar identity with Kuang and she has more political license to find fault in a book that largely tries to armor itself from the same sort of attacks it parodies. Cindy can make her commentary such that she is not coming

from a place of bigoted intentions, as many of the—particularly anti-Asian—sentiments displayed in the novel are. Cindy describes how *Yellowface* briefly glosses over the point that June grew up middle-class, whereas Athena was wealthy and had a well-connected family. She points out the lack of dimensionality in the characters, especially when money and class background play such a massive role in who can be a successful author, both in the sense of having the financial support to work on writing as a primary job and in having the connections to get published and have your work championed. *Yellowface's* entanglement with its own reception contributes to its portrayal of the death of the romance of fiction and the meritocracy that is publishing, making the romance of *Crawdads*, on all levels, feel incredibly, well, romantic.

Where the Crawdads Sing and *Yellowface,* both contemporary novels chosen for RBC, when read together, remind us that the ecosystem surrounding publishing has changed drastically in the twenty-first century. However, they also show that, though a nontrivial segment of the book world has been drastically impacted by the internet and its new forms of mediation and participation, that microcosm is not entirely representative of the entire macrocosm that is literature in America. While the time in which each book is set is undoubtedly essential in understanding how things have changed, it is also vital to note that Kya and June live in vastly varied cloistered environments that highly shape the lens through which they view the broader world. The rituals each woman experiences around reading help us understand how bookishness and its embrace of the aesthetics surrounding reading has shifted into the public consciousness—though only for a particular subset of the reading population. Tracing from *Where the Crawdads Sing* to *Yellowface* allows us to see how the romantic feelings surrounding the act of reading literature have shifted away from the books themselves and, resultingly, become tainted.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

From the Big Screen to the Smaller One

Reese's Book Club offers a salient example of how the systems of middlebrow arbitration have evolved with new technologies. The club's reliance on social media to arbitrate their correspondences with members has allowed them to lean into the recent trend of the romanticization of the whole ecosystem of reading, far beyond the act of reading itself, effectively redirecting the gaze through which both readers and what is potentially being read are seen. In his essay *E Unibus Pluram*, David Foster Wallace explores the then more novel technology of television, though much of this analysis can be extended to social media as a means for delivering content, particularly that which is about other people living their lives in a seemingly authentic way. Wallace provides the metaphor of television as a mirror, though a distorted one: "It's toxic for [people] allergic [to] people because it sets up an alienating cycle, and also for writers because it replaces fiction research with a weird kind of fiction consumption" (Wallace 155). Wallace describes the fiction writer as a voyeur who no longer needs to leave the house to watch people in motion but can write through the lens of the screen. As technologies become more advanced, their smoothening and narrowing powers vis-à-vis the interpretation of what they mediate increase. He also brings up The Most Photographed Barn in America from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*—a detail that was interestingly left out of the recent Netflix adaptation of the novel. "'No one sees the barn…We only see what others see'" (Wallace 170). DeLillo explores how the invention of the camera allows for the mediation of something that once existed as the same object but lacked a broader interpretation from the outside world. Once the barn started being photographed, it was opened up to be seen by a multitude of others, but only from the viewpoint of the viewfinder. Within the variety of channels available—an

early beginning to the fractalization of the American media landscape—the viewer is invited to "'see through' the manipulation" and are met where they are (Wallace 179). While watching television is less interactive than social media, the people on both sides of the equation are self-conscious and self-aware of what they produce and how the consumption of the shows is interpreted. Ratings influenced television, as our social media is driven by analytics. Our contemporary platforms allow individual creators to select the content to produce—or, in the case of book clubs, which content to mediate. Just as studying an academic text in a college English course imposes a particular schema of how to interpret it and similar books, literary influencers provide a framework for selecting and interpreting which books will appeal to their readers and help explain why.

Indeed, reader-favorite Reese books like *Little Fires Everywhere*, *Daisy Jones and the Six*, or *Where the Crawdads Sing* have proved easily adaptable and commercially successful when done so. When part of the deal with Reese choosing each book comes with first dibs towards producing its adaptation, it's hard to believe the types of books chosen are a coincidence. Indeed, a book translated onto the screen would benefit both Reese and its author—not to mention the multitude of other people involved in the publishing and production milieus. As Alexander Manshel, Laura B. McGrath, and J. D. Porter have examined, a book turned into a TV show—or, for that matter, a movie—increases the novel's popularity and often leads to increased academic attention (Manshel et al.). Television shows are episodic, structurally antithetical to the classic novel plot diagram; however, contemporary novels are beginning to adapt to the rise in, as Manshel et al. call it, "must-read TV." In the case of RBC, this appears to be a two-way street: Reese chooses novels that are good for TV because she would like to produce them and make a profit, and writers notice the popularity of adaptable

novels and respond to what works they create. The medium of the novel is only one piece of the story of RBC; the digital mediums surrounding the page play a vital role in the expanding ecosystem by which books are recommended, chosen, and disseminated.

The phenomenon of Reese's Book Club in the context of contemporary middlebrow literature is illustrative of a broader tension between sincerity and personal gain. In this ecosystem of creation, recommendation, and consumption, enjoyment is only one piece of the puzzle vis-à-vis what can be gained by being a successful participant. In thinking about the broader goal of the book club to allow Reese Witherspoon to produce book adaptations, the data support why this mission is proving successful, with, on average, at least one per year. Oprah's Book Club served as an interesting precursor to our current celebrity book club landscape in her self-removal from the monetary implications of her selections, particularly when a key goal of The BOMC was profit, as is that of current, social media-based book recommendation networks. Not only does content promoting or reviewing books provide us with an altered, Most-Photographed-Barn-in-America-esque lens through which to interpret and consume said books, but the proliferation of adaptations of popular titles obfuscates the message with the medium. Do their grand monetary gains cheapen the merits of these novels, or do they show greater societal deference for their original forms? Clearly, an audience who can respond positively to the specific flavor of literature that Reese is promoting has been identified. She aims to empower a broad group of female authors and readers and has curated a diverse yet predictable facet of the book industry, which builds on past successes to identify picks that will generate the most positive feedback. The club promotes conspicuous consumption of the wares and lifestyle it recommends. The resulting system, while arguably providing benefits actors at all levels,

begets the tendencies of technology and data-aided systems to, in effect, have a sort of smoothening over the results.

What's Next?

Being seen as a reader is no longer just a measure of how well read one is, but rather a photo visual reflection of their digital footprint as it relates to books. Radway has identified the association of the romance genre with women and as a separate entity from the highbrow. Driscoll's work in more clearly defining the middlebrow as a category arrived at similar findings. The data shows a substantial prevalence of RBC books primarily associated with this genre. However, as I mentioned previously, many of these selections incorporate elements or tropes from other genres that are similarly associated with the middlebrow, particularly those involving romantic relationships. Indeed, this thread of love moves beyond the plot of the books into their broader milieu. The very idea of reading has become attractive when filtered through the lens offered by social media, which allows a wider yet more specialized audience to see information disseminated in a much quicker and asynchronous manner than earlier mediums. It was essential to examine the tools that created it to understand better how social media has allowed this shift in reading attitudes.

When analyzing a small dataset, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Still, my quantitative findings broadly support the qualitative research that has been done on related topics, as well as the analysis and close reading I have performed on RBC and its selections. Despite the club's only rule being to promote women's voices through literature, we can identify clear trends in the content and marketing of the books chosen beyond their shared femininity, such as genre, length, and words used to describe them. By creating social media subcultures

through tiny systems of positive reinforcement, increased antipathy and detachment between groups becomes easier, and while Reese's Book Club reflects trends in the broader contemporary middlebrow arbitration network, it defines its own specific position within the book social media landscape. With the fractionalization of literary arbitration, it is ever easier to choose a niche and stick within it, with minimal cross-pollination. Reese has successfully leveraged her acting work to bring her audience away from the screen and towards the page. This success has come from a combination of traditional celebrity clout, the fulfillment of a desire for a particular kind of book content for a segment of the population, and the utilization of successful marketing techniques in a contemporary social media context. The questions remain: how long will this continue, and to what extent will the publishing industry be irrevocably changed?

As Reese's Book Club is an ongoing organization, there is ample room for its continued study. As each month passes, another book is added to the list, further fleshing out the collection. For researchers with a longer time frame, I would recommend expanding on the dataset I created to include parts of or full texts of the RBC books—operating under Fair Use—to study not only information that can be found about the books through Goodreads, but also the books' contents themselves at scale. If fuller texts of the books could be obtained, a computational trace of each work's plot and subsequent comparison could prove fruitful for determining more thoroughly the similarities in the corpus—in other words, determining if the wine found in the markedly similar containers is indeed akin to its peers. While this would be a fascinating point to study, it would likely prove infeasible without significant resources devoted to data collection. Other ideas could include—similar to Digital Humanities work done in the past, such as that by Melanie Walsh and Maria Antoniak—scraping and analyzing sentiments in Goodreads or Amazon reviews and exploring trends in the reception of the works (Walsh and

Antoniak). Though more arduous a task, looking to video platforms such as TikTok and YouTube to analyze video reviews or recommendations would help to paint a fuller picture of the audience's reception of the book club's offerings. This could also be explored more qualitatively through research of critical and popular longer-form reviews of the books, such as examining which books received write-ups in *The New York Times Book Review* and whether these happened before or after Reese chose them. Additionally, looking at available metrics of books' success could begin to quantify the influence that RBC has on publishing beyond anecdotal praise from editors and authors. While book sales data is notoriously cloistered, metrics such as placement on *The New York Times* bestseller's list, for example, could be used as a proxy, and the data from *The Times* is readily accessible via an API. Beyond the computational, further research into the interworkings of the book club, such as how Radway profiled The Book of the Month Club many decades ago, would help complement evaluations of public-facing content. Additionally, Reese's Book Club is far from the only organization or individual capitalizing on the proclivity of social media to influence book-related consumption, and the role of other actors in this ecosystem remains understudied as well.

In conclusion, Reese's Book Club has shown itself to be a powerful force in the undeniably influential segment of contemporary literature that is the middlebrow; however, when considering previous systems of arbitration, it is a logical next step in today's technological context. This, too, raises the question of how the ways we learn about and choose to read books will change in the future with the advent of modes of communication we cannot even dream of today. While the middlebrow has shown itself to be a tricky category, it is fair to place Reese's Book Club within it, if not due to the fact the average selection conforms to existing definitions of the category, then by the overall goals and presentation of the organization. While the

medium of our Web 2.0 internet allows for the easy creation of and access to the materials of a digital book club, the decentralized nature of these groups adds a layer of difficulty when attempting their study. However, I was still able to perform some rudimentary computational analysis to support my qualitative study of Reese's Book Club with the limited data that was both easily available and collectible. This data work allowed me to read a small selection of RBC picks in a very directed manner to see what typical and atypical choices looked like at the book level. Through this close reading, I found that, while a typified RBC book conforms to the scholarly impression of the middlebrow, not every book in the collection is canonically middlebrow. Like the content that surrounds them, RBC books have a fascination with all that is book related. In this self-consciousness, we can see not only the acknowledgment of the performativity inherent in that which leverages social media but an active reflection on the phenomenon, if not from the book club members, then at the very least from the authors whose works underlie this whole system.

Appendix

The database I created to perform computational analysis, as well as the analysis itself, are publicly available on my GitHub here: https://github.com/hsmith221/Reeses-book-club.

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