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Finding the Next Book to Read in a Universe of Bestsellers, Blockbusters, and Spin-Offs

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Abstract

Finding a good book to read is part of the challenge of becoming a successful reader. Bestseller lists offer shortcuts, and many readers take advantage of the power to select from a radically smaller pool of possibilities. This article explores aspects of the impact of bestsellers and their adaptations and spin-offs on people's reading choices. It draws the examples of one children's and one adult blockbuster title (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Both these titles made their first appearance online, and, in each case, the printed novel is an early adaptation of the original text. Further adaptations, spin, publicity, and a variety of media tie-ins complicate the ways in which readers may approach these titles. Such proliferation also affects the potential strategies readers may acquire for selecting books, in ways that may be either helpful or restrictive.

Keywords bestsellers, adaptations, selection, recreational reading, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Introduction

What can *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* tell us about readers? These two examples of enormous bestsellers, one for children and one for adults raise many lively questions. Instead of discussing the market implications or the textual details of these materials, however, I am going to address the perspective of readers trying to find another book to read.

That readerly question – what can I read now? – is one of the great divides between active and dormant or non-readers. We often confuse two separate categories: on the one hand, genuinely weak or indifferent readers, and, on the other hand, people who can read perfectly well and enjoy it when they find a book that suits them but who have very limited selection skills.

For many such people, those who are willing to read but do not have much luck finding good reading material, more choice is very often not the answer. Too much choice can be overwhelming rather than appealing.

There are too many books published for any reader even to imagine, as illustrated by one recent example from one country, the United States: in 2011, somewhere between 325,000 and 350,000 books were published there (Price, 2012, n.pag.) The number of self-published books is rising exponentially (from 235,000 titles reported by Bowker in 2011 to 391,000 in 2012, for example [Cader, 2013, n.pag.]). Keeping up is impossible in this scenario. And many, many readers will find themselves overwhelmed by even a tiny fraction of such enormous output.

In such a situation – and, remember, this is a situation that repeats itself annually! – the bestseller list becomes a very helpful selection tool. It reduces, say, 328,259 possible titles down to just a handful. And these are titles that are vouched for already by large numbers of other people; what Valerie Bang-Jensen calls the "social contagion" (2010, 169) of other readers' choices is a potent reading energizer in itself. These are the books that other people will be talking about. A choice that was simply impossible to make suddenly becomes very manageable indeed.

Of course, bestselling books do not simply remain as books. They are adapted into movies. They provide the base plot of game worlds. They feed fan fiction. They supply fodder for countless articles, interviews, reviews, commentaries, and critiques, on paper,

online, on television and radio. The title that was so promising to the reader in its very singularity proliferates in many different formats, raising new kinds of selection questions along the way.

It is these issues that I will explore further in this article: selection, singularity, proliferation, adaptation, and repetition, all in the context of bestsellers, blockbusters, and their many, many spin-offs – and all through the lens of reader behavior.

One text, many re-workings

I want to begin with that idea of the singular text and its reworkings – and the implications for reader behaviors. Even a single bestseller title offers readers different ways of thinking about their reading priorities.

The linear approach

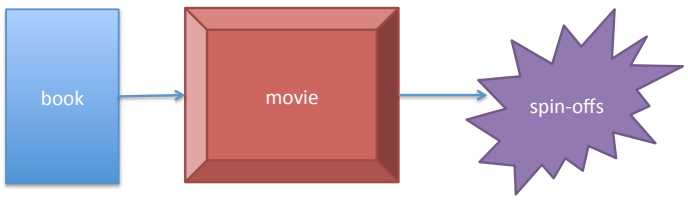
One option is to consider the originating text as the work of art and every subsequent adaptation as a dilution, a watering down, a weakening of the artistic value of the original. Some variation of this approach is often the default thinking even of people who assume they have more nuanced attitudes. It is certainly often the stance of large numbers of young people; over twenty-plus years of working with youthful readers and viewers, I have heard many, many variations of the statement that the first text to be produced or published is the "true" version, against which all other variants must be judged.

We may learnedly write off this attitude as a kind of fidelity fallacy, but its potency in the world is very strong. Many young people have rules for themselves, that they must read the book before they allow themselves to go see the movie, for example; I have interviewed numerous teens and adults who take this idea as a mantra for organizing their aesthetic experiences. Every experience after the initial encounter is comparative, so they select their initial encounter by paying attention to the sequence of initial publication and production, even when the first instantiation of a story does not appeal to them.

This purist approach to the multiplication of texts across a large range of media offers its advocates some relatively simple strategies for managing their media lives. You start with the original and keep moving through different layers of adaptation, stopping when

you feel you are getting too far away from the pure gold of the first text in the sequence. Thus, you might read the book, watch the movie, listen to the soundtrack, and maybe take a look at a trailer for the video game. You might glance at a couple of websites relating to the movie, or you might post a comment on the book on your own site at Library Thing or Goodreads. But you know when the mix is getting too thin for your own taste, and you are not interested in pursuing the text into, say, the regions of fan fiction. It is a relatively linear approach, with many built-in safety rails. It may radically simplify selection considerations. You can pick your title, go

The default singular schema

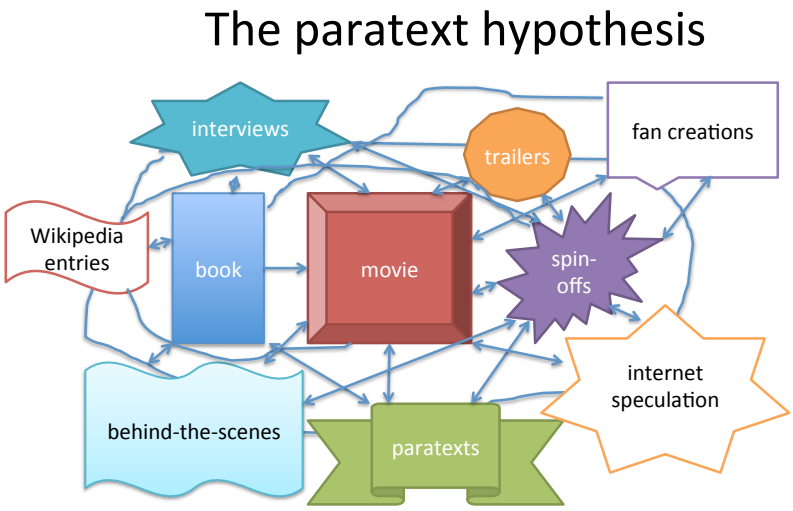


as far as you choose, and stop when this mix becomes too thin for your taste. One title can last a long time.

The paratextual route

That is one paradigm. In his work on paratexts, Jonathan Gray (2010) offers a very different perspective on the multiplicity of texts available to us. A paratext is the apparatus that stands between a text and its audience: book cover, title, illustration, blurb, recommendation, author biography, and the like. Gray also includes the full machinery of advertisements, trailers, reviews, and the like in his definition. More often than not, he says, by the time we approach a text itself, we have already moved through a huge range of framing devices that shape how we see the story world before we ever set an imaginary "foot" inside its fictional doors. Gray's aesthetic world is a very long way from linear. It is convoluted and

elaborate, winding back on itself in ornate ways. In Gray's account of the universe, you might see some references in the article that a new movie is to be made, you could read interviews with the actors and producers, perhaps you see television shows passing judgment on the movie, you possibly catch online trailers and maybe some behind-the-scenes insights on a website, and you know so much about this film before you ever lay eyes on it yourself that you could keep up an acceptable conversation about it even if you never bothered with the main event at all. Even if, at this point, you rush to read the book before you go to the movie theatre, so that you can start with the "original" version, your approach to the text has been shaped and framed by the marketing devices. The pure and unmediated encounter with the originating text that is at the heart of my first description proves, by this accounting, to be completely impossible, a Platonic figment of wishful imagination.



The culture of "unfinish"

You do not have to take sides between these clashing accounts to know that most of us move among the many possibilities surrounding a major new story with a sophisticated set of tacit skills for noticing and also for ignoring. The old idea that a narrative has a

beginning, a middle, and an end does not seem to be as straightforward as it once was.

Peter Lunenfeld speaks of a contemporary culture of "unfinish." Between sequels, and spin-offs, and re-workings and remediation, and marketing opportunities, and fan fiction, and parodies, and memes, and ever-emerging online role-playing games, and so forth, he suggests, "Technology and popular culture propel us toward a state of unfinish in which the story is never over, and the limits of what constitutes the story proper are never to be as clear again" (2000, 14).

Whatever happened to the spin-off?

Even in a world of paratextual sophistication, the spin-off does not have a good reputation. To many people, the spin-off is all about money; it exploits a popular title or character even as it moves further and further from the original.

It is not necessary to be a cultural throwback or a reader reactionary to subscribe to this rejection of the spin-off. Many schools continue to teach a version of the linear model of fidelity and diminishment that supports this kind of cultural interpretation.

This description, needless to say, is an over-simplification, but I think it is important not to underestimate its potency, even in 2013. At the same time, of course, the facts of contemporary bestsellerdom contradict it in a variety of ways, and it will not take us many examples to establish the complex nature of spinning off in the 21st century. Some of the most sensationally successful titles demonstrate how Lunenfeld's pairing of "technology and popular culture" is entwined in ways that exploit the affordances of new technological means to create popular texts that break all previous sales and readership records in developing new forms of franchise fiction. The original and the spin-off co-exist in complex relationships.

To pursue these issues, let us look at two very famous examples of blockbuster bestsellers and their associated spin-offs. Let us consider some of the intricate ways in which they enter and influence our cultural lives, and affect our behavior as readers. The *Wimpy Kid* series is aimed at children, and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy is adult in content and marketing. This unlikely pair has points in common, among them the fact that, in each case, the novel itself is a spin-off of a prior text.

The Wimpy Kid

In November 2013, Jeff Kinney published his eighth *Wimpy Kid* novel for children: *Hard Luck*. It had an initial print run of 800,000 copies, Penguin's biggest ever first printing of a children's book. By the November 2013 publication date, the publisher said the complete series surpassed 115 million books in print (Page, 2013, n.pag.)

The Third Wheel, the seventh title published a year earlier, instantly rose to the top of bestseller lists at the *New York Times* and Amazon, selling a million copies in the first five weeks ("New Wimpy Kid," 2012, n.pag.) It has been translated into 35 languages and published in more than 36 countries (MacDonald, 2012, n.pag.)

Such numbers make a powerful case that the paper book is alive and thriving. Yet the genesis of the *Wimpy Kid* saga is complex, and in fact a strong argument can be made that the book is actually the spin-off product in this franchise.

In May 2004, Jeff Kinney began to publish *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* on the educational website Funbrain.com, a site organized by the Family Education Network of the giant publishing conglomerate Pearson. The printed book version was not published until April 2007. During those three intervening years, the web version of the story was viewed by 20 million unique online readers. In 2007, as the advertising for the book began to heat up, the *Wimpy Kid* website was averaging 70,000 readers every day (http://www.abramsbooks.com/Books/Diary_of_a_Wimpy_Kid-978081099316.html, accessed December 22, 2012).

The online story and the first printed story contain many similarities but of course each version offers the story to the reader in a different way. The online version is easy to read in random order; an organizing calendar makes it simple to dip into the entry at any given date. Once you are "inside" a day, however, you must follow the linear arrows "next" or "back." And, as has been noted by many observers, there are numerous distractions on the screen: buttons to link to other sites, advertisements for the book versions, the ever-present invitation of the calendar to hop around the year.

The book version of this story, the spin-off that appeared long after the *Diary* had proved its popularity online, shares the format of the eponymous diary itself, a format that the original screen version merely simulates. It is easily open to browsing and skimming

in ways that are more laborious in the online edition (but, no matter how you flick through or turn back, the year remains secure in its linear order because the binding keeps the page order static). The text and illustrations of the diary, as seen online, are the main content of the book and the only content on most of its pages; no distractions, advertisements, invitations elsewhere. And of course, you hold a book in your hands differently from the way you establish tactile connection with a computer. Even where the contents are close to identical, the reading experience is different.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid has been called a comic, a graphic novel, and an illustrated novel, but its cartoon images of stick figures suggest a simplicity that is highly deceptive. With its unreliable narrator, Greg Heffley, and the subtle contradictions sometimes posed between the words and the pictures, the story is not as artlessly straightforward as it first appears. And any notion of an uncomplicated fictional world evaporates in the face of the multiverse of spin-offs that comprise the complete fictional territory of the Wimpy Kid.

To take a bite-sized sample, let us explore one paratext: the contents of a two-minute trailer for the first movie of the *Wimpy Kid* series. A major feature of this trailer is the mutation of cartoon characters into actors; we see the stick people images of all the major characters in the story; in a single fade, each morphs into the figure of the relevant actor. The trailer refers twice to the book (not at all to the website) and in its final reference (complete with visual of the book cover) to *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, we hear a voice-over from Greg, protesting, "It's a journal" – so even the very title is suspect (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZVEIgPeDCE, accessed January 19, 2013).

The poster for the movie also emphasizes the links between stick boy and acting boy (the actor's real-life body has a stick-person shadow), and reproduces the ontological joke about the title in a new format: "It's not a diary, it's a movie."

The movie itself expands on this joke of the cartoon associations. Flashes to the lined pages of the diary and the stick figure drawings underline key moments of the live action drama. Director Thor Freudenthal explains this artistic decision in terms of audience sophistication:

> "Kids today are just inundated with different forms of media all day long, and I felt the movie had to acknowledge that fact," Freudenthal says. That often means that the cartoons suddenly fill the entire screen, offering a familiar touchstone to fans of books that combine words with cartooning (della Cava, 2010, 03d).

The official *Wimpy Kid* website offers a fairly standard potpourri of discourses and invitations: news items, author tour dates, book advertisements, an invitation to a cartooning class with Jeff Kinney, and a strip of buttons linking to "Fun Stuff" – links that further lead in a variety of directions.

For example, "Wimpy Kid Stuff" is a collection of relatively standard-issue commodities – it is slightly interesting to see the stick figures take on three dimensions as figurines, but there is little new or intriguing for sale on this branch of the official website.

The Poptropica link is a very different story. Kinney is one of the creators of this website, and he describes it as "a really immersive world where kids could come in and they could play as a character in a story." The site, he says, merges "great storytelling with a truly interactive experience." It is "a giant virtual world" with many islands, each featuring a different quest. Perhaps most tellingly, Kinney says, "In Poptropica, there's a beginning, a middle, but the story never ends" – a concept that Peter Lunenfeld would recognize (all quotes from *Jeff Kinney Talks about Poptropica*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXnz13p966Q, accessed December 22, 2012).

The YouTube video from which these quotes were taken was posted on May 26, 2011, and it claims 150 million users for the Poptropica website, a number that will only have increased since that time. How many of these users are the audience the site actually addresses, children between 6 and 15, is not clear.

Wimpy Wonderland is a Poptropica game set in a snow day, with schools closed because of bad weather. All Greg's friends are out having fun, but Greg's little brother Manny is lost, and players of the game are invited to help Greg find him.

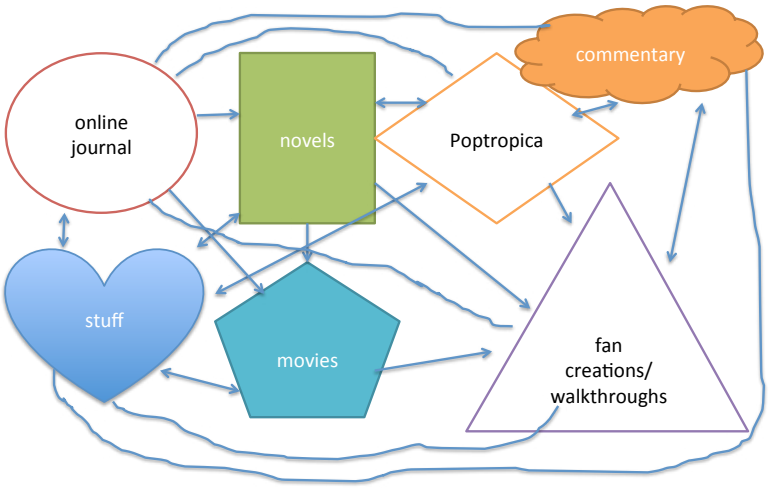
Young players take on the challenge of *Wimpy Wonderland*, and then they create spin-offs of their own in the form of walkthroughs for other players. This particular phenomenon seems to have peaked in 2012; Google featured 83,000 walkthroughs when I

checked at the end of 2012, but in late 2013 that number had shrunk to 28,400 – still a significant tally. No doubt many of them are duplicates or dead ends, but the residue, even of the lower number, offers very many options to lead a player through all the intricacies of the game. Undoubtedly some are plants, placed online by the Poptropica marketers, but many are created by enthusiastic amateurs.

This level of user participation is a bonus spin-off for Poptropica and Jeff Kinney. The game was initially launched as part of the publicity campaign for the first *Wimpy Kid* movie (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poptropica#Wimpy_Wonderland, accessed December 22, 2012).

So *Wimpy Wonderland*, by Jonathan Gray's definition, was an online paratext marketing the movie version of the book that was created out of the online story, and the walkthroughs offer one level more of spin (and a different kind of "unfinish"). It is a high-

A very partial schema of the *Wimpy Kid* universe



ly complex universe, yet young readers traverse it with ease, and indeed create and post both videos and extended prose instructions in order to demonstrate their expertise in managing this multi-layered world.

Fifty Shades of Grey

Fifty Shades of Grey shares at least two traits with *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*: startling sales figures and an online origin. Again, the paper novel is a spin-off, and the fictional beginnings are complex.

Famously, this erotic trilogy began life as a fan fiction based on *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), and the relationship between the two main characters, initially at least, arose out of a different story. Just as children would find different ways of reading *Wimpy Kid* diary entries according to whether they appear on the screen or the page, so adults would approach Ana and Christian's relationship differently if they were reading it in light of the aura cast by *Twilight*'s Bella and Edward. Readers may well disagree about how completely the second story fledged itself out of the nest of the first; and, of course, readers of the first series may regard the sado-masochistic account of Ana and Christian as an unacceptable contamination of their beloved vampire story. Creating a new world out of the bones of an existing one, even before the metastatic sales levels are taken into account, is another kind of "unfinish," one that has always been privately possible but that takes on a whole new dimension in the Internet age.

The book first appeared as a self-published e-book. Initially, the title is thought to have benefited from being an e-publication, since readers could discreetly carry it around with them without public embarrassment. But once it appeared in paper format in early 2012, followed by two sequels, it became clear that embarrassment was not a hindrance to many readers. Between early April and May 22, 2012, the paper books sold 10 million copies, and the daily sales figures were equally staggering: "Vintage announced Tuesday reprints of the books have exceeded 900,000 copies in a single day - that includes paperbacks, e-books and audio books" (Mattson, 2012, n.pag.)

Fifty Shades of Grey then moved into the next stage of blockbusterdom with rampant speculation, bets, and online votes concerning the actors who would play the main roles in the upcoming movie. The paratextual impact was considerable, as potential viewers get to imagine the story through the prism of different casts.

The fallout from the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is far from completed. Some of the spin-off marketing, though not what we normally associate with famous books, is entirely predictable: the pur-

veyors of sex toys everywhere are grasping at lucrative links and there are many erotic websites claiming a connection to the series.

A more interesting spin-off absorbs centuries of other connotations, and colonizes an intriguing list of classical music as part of its lascivious universe. The CD soundtrack for *Fifty Shades of Grey* comprises a playlist of serious music:

1. Lakmé (Act I): Flower Duet (Mady Mesplé, Danielle Millet)
2. Bach: Adagio from Concerto #3 BWV 974 (Alexandre Tharaud)
3. Villa-Lobos: Bachianas Brasilerias #5 - Cantilena (Barbara Hendricks)
4. Verdi: La Traviata Prelude (Riccardo Muti / Philharmonia Orchestra)
5. Pachelbel: Canon in D (Sir Neville Marriner/ Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields)
6. Tallis: Spem in Alium (The Tallis Scholars)
7. Chopin: Prelude #4 in E minor, Largo (Samson François)
8. Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto #2 - Adagio Sostenuto (Cecile Ousset, Sir Simon Rattle / CBSO)
9. Vaughan Williams: Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (Sir Adrian Boult / LPO)
10. Canteloube: Chants d'auvergne, Bailero (Arleen Auger)
11. Chopin: Nocturne #1 in B-flat minor (Samson François)
12. Faure: Requiem - In Paradisum (Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Stephen Cleobury)
13. Bach: Goldberg Variation - Aria (Maria Tipo)
14. Debussy: La Fille Aux Cheveux de Lin (Moura Lympany)
15. Bach: Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring (Alexis Weissenberg) ("Fifty Shades of Grey Classical Album," 2012)

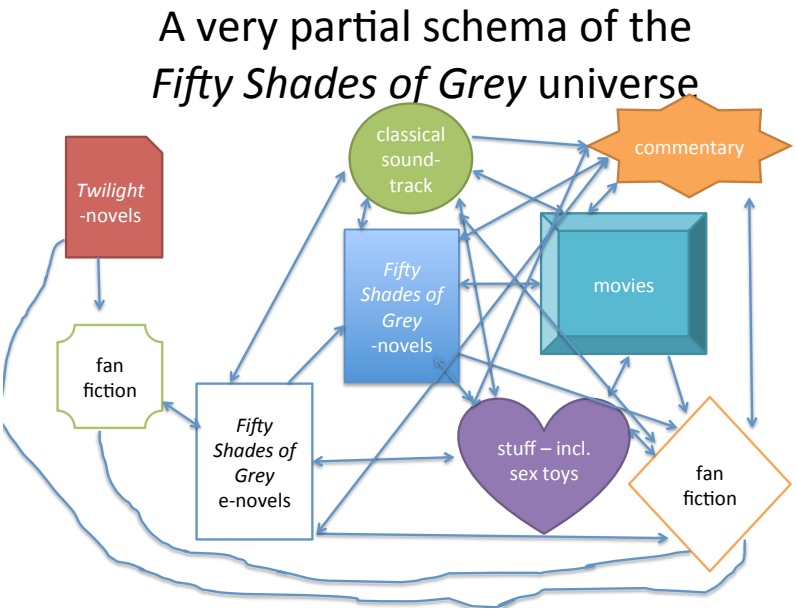
Some of these pieces are favourites of mine, and I am not sure they are improved by thinking of them as music to spank by. But the impact (so to speak!) of the books' citation of works of music like these is clear: "EMI Classics, which is releasing the album, credits the books with the recent Classical music sales boost, citing Thomas Tallis' 16th century 'Spem in Alium' topping British charts after being referenced in *Fifty Shades*" (O'Connell, 2012, n.pag.).

Peter Lunenfeld, in his fascinating discussion of the aesthetic of unfinish, does not address the issue of recorded music. He credits

the "universal solvent of the digital" (2000, 14) with much of the open-endedness of our culture. It seems to me, however, that as soon as recorded music became available, it transformed the finite nature of music performance once and forever. If I own a recording, there is no limit to the number of times I can listen to "Spem in Alium;" in that way, it does enter the zone of "unfinish." If I decide to associate it with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, then that story also takes on some of this aspect of perpetual repetition – and perhaps does so in the way hinted at by Gill Sutherland:

> and not just because it reminds us that super saucy episode in Shades when Ana has a blindfold on and Master Grey does some uber rude things to her (well, OK, that might have given us a frisson of associated delight) (2012, n.pag.)

Whether or not such "frissons" are inexhaustible, the music can certainly be recycled much more readily than a complete reading



of the books, and if it evokes a kind of shorthand emotional and sexual punch (again, so to speak!), it extends the life cycle of the story's immediate effects.

Turning full circle, there are hundreds of fan fictions, telling and re-telling this story.

The impact on readers

In a world where spin-offs tidily diminish in importance the further away they get from the original, readers' selection choices and reading attitudes are relatively clear-cut. In a world marked by ever-circling reiterations, returns, and retellings, where a classical reference in a spin-off novel can send a piece of sixteenth-century religious music to the top of the British charts in 2012, the ways in which readers may approach their cultural options become more complex. My very incomplete graphics of *The Wimpy Kid* world and the *Fifty Shades* universe take on even more complexity if you consider every element in the drawing as a portal of entry for some readers.

In such a multivariate world, teaching only the straight-line, Puritanical, each-adaptation-is-a-diminution attitude does readers no favours at all. If the great untaught reading skill is the capacity to select, to find the right book, the contemporary proliferation of so many circuitous options may be as confusing as it is helpful.

In part, the mind-blowing numbers associated with *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are a reflection of the fact that many people do not have more subtle selection skills than to read what everyone else is reading. In making this comment, I am not saying that these novels and other number 1 titles do not have something to offer to a very wide range of readers; clearly they do. But I think it is also true that many people enjoy reading bestsellers in part because they do actually like to read and a headline-hitting title that is being read by all their friends and relations provides a shortcut to finding the next book that will offer genuine reading pleasure.

People also, of course, like to talk about what they are reading, and again the bestselling novel provides shortcuts; you can be sure that other people will be reading the same book and be happy to talk about it.

Nevertheless, educators do their students a huge injustice if they do not equip them with more autonomous and sophisticated tools for locating titles that will suit their reading needs and pleasures. Some of the traditional routes to finding new books to read are shrinking or fading away altogether; in many newspapers, for example, the review section is a shadow of its former self if it still exists at all. On the positive side, however, informal readers' advisory activities online have taken off and there are many ways in

which readers can make contact with other readers and share their tastes and their recommendations.

Learning how to select from a culture of "unfinish," in a world where a story may be endlessly recycled, is an art in itself. With more and more choices, selection may become broader; but it may also become narrower when it is so easy to cling on to something you already know, through ever more reiterations.

There used to be a simple dichotomy between intensive and extensive reading: intensive reading involved the repeated perusal of a few important texts: the Bible is the most commonly cited example; for English-speaking readers, *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan would have provided another option. Extensive reading is commonly thought to have opened up with the invention of the printing press, the development of cheap publications, the democratization of education, and so forth. But it is possible to have a reading life intensively focused on, say, *The Wimpy Kid*, without doing very much actual repeat reading.

In a world of unfinish, extensive and intensive reading take on a new guise. In their most extreme versions, each offers a troubling caricature of a shallow reader. Extensive reading may involve skimming the web, hyperlinking across the surface, never being able to retrace your travels, contributing to an ongoing state of continuous partial attention. The extensive reader may be seen as a gadfly. But intensive reading in a digital age may also be extreme, with the reader circling the inexhaustible text world of a single title and becoming expert in one fictional universe, mastering reiterations and reworkings and commentaries and fanfics without ever moving on; such a reader might be perceived as obsessive. But both proclivities may sometimes simply represent the default results of poorly developed selection skills.

I do not want to denigrate either extreme surfing or intense focus on a single textual universe. On the other hand, I do not want to romanticize behaviors that may actually represent only the *least worst* option at the selector's disposal. We need to consider the issues of selecting from abundance. With so many entry points, how do we learn to direct our attention most productively? What maps and aids may help us find our way in this ever-proliferating world? If we find ourselves mired in one of the options I caricatured, how do we learn to move on from massive investment in a single text

once we finally reach the point of exhausting it? Alternatively, how do we learn to settle when we are used to flitting?

One way of describing book selection processes is to say that they help us to dispose our reading attention in productive ways. We all know that our attention is easily distracted or consumed by the latest, brightest headline. Reading the bestseller may be the path of least resistance; at best, our reading attention may be more shaped and framed by commercial paratexts than we are happy to concede.

The decline of bookstores (Vinjamuri, 2013, n.pag.) and the threats to the collections budgets of public libraries (Coffman, 2013, n.pag.) mean that readers make less use of the kind of information gained by physically handling a book. A Literacy Trust study of British youth presented statistics of a drop in children's leisure reading, and stated that 35% of boys questioned said, "I cannot find things to read that interest me" (Bury, 2013, n.pag.) Such a statement indicates that "finding" is at least part of the "reading" problem.

Young people are shifting at least some of their attention to mobile platforms and apps. An American study by Nielson also found a rise in the number of occasional and non-readers among children under 17, and added:

> The research shows that children's reading is being affected by alternative activities, such as playing games, watching videos on websites like YouTube, and texting. During the past year, children's access to tablets more than doubled over the previous year. The devices are being used for a range of activities, but reading is considered one of its least important uses (Farrington, 2013, n.pag.)

At the same time, a different American poll sponsored by *USA Today* and the website bookish.com found that owning an e-reader can lead to increased reading: "35% of those with reading devices say they're reading more books since they got their reading devices" (Minzesheimer, 2013, n.pag.) Yet e-book growth is slowing (Jones, 2013, n.pag.)

In short, we are in a situation of such ongoing flux that it is different to make many hard-and-fast predictions. Regardless of technological, social, and cultural changes, however, we know that

readers will stop reading if there is nothing interesting for them to read. Selection skills continue to be very significant.

Issues of attention in times of "unfinish"

Cathy N. Davidson of Duke University has taken a serious interest in the subject of attention, how we are learning more about the mechanisms that make it function and how we need to learn to dispose our attention in the Internet age. In her intriguing book *Now You See It* (2011), she provides a checklist for 21st century literacies that has some useful things to say. Her complete list is 17 items long and is very well worth reading, but for my purposes at this point, I will focus on the first four entries, which she adapted from the work of Howard Rheingold. And rather than expound on these four qualities in detail, I will relate them directly back to the intricate world of bestsellers, blockbusters, spin-offs, and the challenges of selection.

Here are Davidson and Rheingold's top four considerations:

- Attention: What are the new ways that we pay attention in a digital era? How do we need to change our concepts and practices of attention for a new era? How do we learn and *practice* new forms of attention in a digital age?
- Participation: How do we encourage meaningful interaction and participation in a digital age? How can the Internet be useful on a cultural, social, or civic level?
- Collaboration: Collaboration can simply reconfirm consensus, acting more as peer pressure than a lever to truly original thinking. [We need to cultivate] the methodology of "collaboration by difference" to inspire meaningful ways of working together.
- Network Awareness: How can we thrive as creative individuals and at the same time understand our contribution within a network of others? How do we gain a sense of what that extended network is and what it can do? (297)

Attention, participation, collaboration, and network awareness all have roles to play in the reception of *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, even if they function in non-linear ways (attention to the Tallis Scholars singing "Spem in Alium" as a kind of soundtrack for abuse was not part of anybody's cultural algorithm until E.L. James

put it in the spotlight, an enterprising recording company followed up, and a huge version of networked awareness did the rest).

It is easy to see mass phenomena, of which *The Wimpy Kid* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are such stunning exemplars, as everywhere and amorphous and actually kind of simple in their vastness and ubiquity. But the routes into and out of these fictional worlds are many and various. The responses of readers are complex – shaped by an enormous commercial apparatus, intertwined with the reactions of other readers, and still deeply personal. The literate affordances of the 21st century, to which I have so briefly alluded, make the whole situation radically more complicated. Within a vast and complicated surround of paratexts, the spin-off begets the bestseller, the blockbuster begets the spin-off, and large numbers of people pay attention, participate in the phenomenon, collaborate in responding (think of all those *Wimpy Wonderland* walkthroughs), and throw up an enormous grid of networked awareness.

It is easy to find responses that denigrate *The Wimpy Kid* as a comic-book cop-out that distracts kids from better reading, or that dismiss *Fifty Shades of Grey* as badly written and unerotic soft porn. You do not even have to disagree with these views to find the massively popular phenomena associated with these titles to be fascinatingly intricate and textured. Something very intriguing is going on in these cases of mass enthusiasm. We need to explore what is happening with all the subtlety at our disposal – and making the best use we can of our own tools of attention, participation, collaboration, and networked awareness. It is important to address the full complexity of the circulation and re-circulation of these mass materials.

At the same time, we should think about developing selection skills that are not dependent on the reductivism of bestseller lists, even as platforms shift and change, and hype seems ever more powerful. Respecting mass choices but not being confined to them requires walking a fine line, but it is an important space to find.

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