

**Beth Driscoll.** *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century.* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 240 pp.

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One of the things the sociology of reading usefully does is challenge the givenness of structures of value we tend to take for granted. It documents the way in which particular values tend to become associated with particular social groups, and it undermines the hierarchies of value with which academic literary studies implicitly works.

Recent studies of middlebrow culture, beginning with Joan Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), have delineated a reading formation prevalent in the mid-twentieth century which is at once highly commercial and culturally aspirational: a culture of reverence for 'quality' writing which it wants in an easily digestible form (the *Reader's Digest* is one of its manifestations). Beth Driscoll's study extends this analysis into the contemporary period, focusing on a number of key institutions of middlebrow culture: the book club, and its mass-mediated model in Oprah's Book Club; the use of the Harry Potter novels to teach particular engaged and identificatory ways of reading; the world of literary prizes; and the literary festival. Middlebrow culture in the contemporary world

is personalized book recommendations on Amazon, or a café in the middle of an independent bookstore. It is a literary prize's Twitter feed or a movie star's sold-out appearance at a writer's festival. It is online cultural magazines such as Salon.com or Slate.com, or a book club that watches Austen TV adaptations. (5)

What holds all this together is a set of characteristics that roughly define a distinctive formation: middlebrow culture is 'middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest' (6).

Now, much of this seems to me to be straightforwardly accurate, and Driscoll does a thorough and thoughtful job of working out the cultural and institutional dimensions of her analysis. In particular, she makes a strong case for there being a distinctively feminised mode of reading, which values affective identification with characters, which looks for a reflection of its own experiences in their lives, and which is 'ethical' in the sense of exercising moral judgement on a world that is taken to be close to the real world: this regime looks for 'stories of personal growth and moral redemption,' and sees reading 'as part of a larger project of moral improvement' (40). Lauren Berlant's model of the intimate public sphere—the creation of a "porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging" (63, citing Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*)—is appropriately invoked here, although I think Driscoll misses Berlant's point about the politically fantasmatic nature of this scene of identification. The chapter on Oprah admirably fleshes out the characteristics of this feminised and therapeutic mode of reading, and it's nicely complemented by the chapter on literary festivals, which are 'attended predominantly by middle-class women, promote reading practices that are emotional, earnest and highly mediated, inflected by

respect for literary stars and enmeshed in the commercial structures of the publishing industry' (153).

My concern, however, is with what exactly it means to call this reading formation 'middlebrow,' and what it means to call it 'middle class.' Let me make a couple of subsidiary points before I take up this concern. First, the feminised reading formation described here has much older antecedents than the mid-twentieth-century culture of the various Great Books series, the Reader's Digest, and the Book-of-the-Month Club; Driscoll alludes briefly to the prevalence of female authors in the early history of the novel, and it might have been useful to explore Nancy Armstrong's argument about the role of 'domestic fiction' in forming the culture—and thereby the hegemonic social role—of the English middle classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Second, there's little recognition of genres other than the novel, apart from a few brief references to confessional non-fiction; and the book's exclusively literary focus means that the reading of novels, with its specific class and educational ethos, is not situated in relation to the watching of film and television; there is, of course, an extensive recognition of the dissemination and translation of the literary through those other media, but not of the relative structures of prestige at play in the relation between media.

What this means is that the category of the middlebrow in fact refers to a cultural activity that ranks rather high on the scale of cultural value; and Driscoll acknowledges that the (mostly) women who attend literary festivals tend to be of Anglo heritage, tertiary-educated, and to have a relatively high income. In what sense then is the reading of novels a 'middle-class' activity? The term is of course notoriously slippery: almost everyone now thinks they belong to it. Driscoll has a couple of different goes at defining it: by contrast with the land-owning aristocracy, the manual working class and the *petite bourgeoisie*, for example—a set of contrasts relevant for the nineteenth century but not the present; or, quite tautologously, by reference to Bourdieu's aligning of socioeconomic class with cultural capital; or simply as equivalent to 'professional.' This key term thus lacks any analytic precision.

Even more problematic, however, is the attempt to define the middlebrow by contrast to 'elite' culture. At the heart of this contrastive definition is the description of the middlebrow as an inherently commercial culture; thus, 'For all its reverence towards high art, middlebrow culture is also thoroughly implicated in commercial distribution networks' (23); and literary festivals are said to be 'a middlebrow mixture of art and commerce' (157). The assumption is always that 'high' or 'elite' culture is non-commercial, a purely autonomous art; but, with the marginal exception of the artisanal publishing of most poetry, it is simply not the case that the publication of 'high' literary texts takes place outside commercial distribution networks. The novels of Coetzee or McEwan or DeLillo, or the poems of Anne Carson, don't become middlebrow by virtue of the fact that they win prizes or because their authors attend literary festivals; Jonathan Franzen, set up here as the high-cultural antagonist to the middlebrow Oprah, writes best-selling and 'realist' novels, not esoteric 'elite' texts. These authors' books may, however, be read in middlebrow ways: the middlebrow is a manner of reading, not an attribute of texts or of their relation to the institutions of literature.

Driscoll's assumptions about this are, I think, loaded by her wish to defend that way of reading against other ways that she finds elitist (or 'avant garde,' or 'academic'). Thus whereas Oprah brings a moral perspective to books, Franzen is 'moralistic'; and 'literary values' are always said to be 'elite'—rather than being seen as plural and variable. This is a shame because, in setting up this fantasy figure of a form of art or a mode of reading which is

superior to the commercial or academic circuits in which literary value is constructed, she promulgates precisely that reverence for elite culture which is characteristic of the reading formation she analyses and that removes it from the reach of a properly critical account of reading.

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