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Review of “What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age” by Beth Driscoll

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

A review of the book *What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age* by Beth Driscoll, presenting a Reader-Centered Networks Model for Contemporary Reading Studies to be used both in research and teaching.

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As a contemporary reader, you may hear about a book from your friend, decide to order the book online, read it and then write a review on it, which you post on a social media platform, inspiring other readers to perhaps go to their local bookshop to pick up a copy themselves. This is what it means to read in the post-digital age, where print and digital technologies seamlessly interact to inform what we read, how we read and how we communicate about it. In *What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age*, Beth Driscoll describes reading as a dynamic, social and cultural practice that flexibly incorporates digital, in-person and print-based practices. She thus foregoes the distinctions between paper versus screen reading or analogue versus digital reading, which are often central to contemporary reading research. She combines ethnographic, cultural analytic and qualitative approaches to investigate contemporary reading practices and situate them in a larger post-digital context.

Research on contemporary reading practices abounds in recent years, mostly coming from cultural analytics and focusing on social reading events (e.g., Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2013; Lang, 2012; Peplow et al., 2015) or from computational literary studies emphasizing digital reading practices (e.g., Pianzola, 2021), or a combination of both (e.g., Thomas, 2020). Most of this research investigates the behaviour of readers engaging in book-related activities in a variety of social contexts (e.g., social media environments, mass reading events, book clubs). Driscoll's book adds to this literature by focusing on how readers intertwine social and private readerly behaviours in a post-digital and capitalistic world. To the readership of *Scientific Study of Literature*, this could be seen as a new perspective entirely, as the theoretical framework she introduces argues for the centrality of readers' agency and creativity in research on reading. Even though the empirical study of literature purports to investigate the real reader, as opposed to the implied reader (Hanauer, 2024), our research still mostly takes the text as point of departure in the study of reading. Much of the early research within empirical literary studies and SSOL is concerned with the reception of *literary* texts, and thereby has, perhaps unwittingly, taken over the classed and gendered perspectives of traditional literary studies. Are we really investigating real readers, if we are not looking at texts that real readers tend to read? Only more recently, do we see studies in our journal and at our conferences that take the reader as their point of departure, thereby broadening the scope of texts and practices under investigation: for example, fanfiction (Pianzola, Rebora, & Lauer, 2020) and shared reading (Gustafsson et al., 2022).

Driscoll's book is divided into five chapters, reflecting on different aspects of readers' active involvement in different networks. In Chapter 1, Driscoll builds her theoretical framework, for which she uses actor-network theory, as it recognizes human and non-human actors, which she argues is important to account for the materiality of books and reading. In this way the framework can consider print objects, digital platforms and physical places, such as bookstores, libraries, and festivals, alongside, or rather informed by, readers. "Actor-network theory holds that the task of defining and ordering the social, should be left to actors, not taken up by analysts...[meaning that] scholars need to cede some of their authority to non-professional readers and recognize academia as one regime of reading among many other potential arrangements" (Driscoll, 2024, p. 29). Consequently, the Reader-Centered Networks model for Contemporary Reading Studies she develops is based on four principles, namely (a) start with readers, not with text; (b) find out what the readers you are interested in are reading and read it; (c) investigate the networks that produced this text and its readings; and (d) consider the readers, text, and readings and how they relate to one another in one network. We particularly liked the recommendation from Driscoll to let these principles underpin teaching at the university level, offering the opportunity to rejuvenate literary studies through the incorporation of analysis of recreational reading. The networked, multi-method approach involved in this kind of research and teaching, requires expertise across multiple fields and methods, which should make this framework suitable and appealing for researchers in the field of empirical literary studies.

Driscoll continues in Chapter 2 with a discussion of reader networks (e.g., readers as consumers, readers as citizens), and how these are shaped by power relations that affect readers' visibility, agency, and ability to express themselves. The range of roles that readers assume challenge the notion of a fixed reader identity, demonstrating instead that readers' roles are contingent on the environments in which they engage with texts, be they online or offline. (Post-)digital shifts have redefined access and reshaped power dynamics within the industry, and while readers are increasingly commodified, they—as well as their (reading) practices—adapt and subvert platforms to meet personal needs. Reading affinity spaces, such as bookstores, libraries, or

online book clubs, operate as nodes in networks, or what we might also describe as ‘Third Places’ (Oldenburg & Cristensen, 2023). Of these spaces, Driscoll highlights the potential of in-person book clubs for readers’ self-formation and their aesthetic and moral conduct. This emphasis nicely mirrors an ongoing trend in Empirical Literary Studies that focuses on transformative or impactful reading, particularly in social spaces, such as Shared Reading groups.

In Chapter 3, Driscoll describes the aesthetic conduct of readers by examining three platforms suited to showcase this behaviour, namely bibliomemoirs, bookstagram (and other similar social media platforms), and book clubs. In these examples, the common thread is bookishness, which is a performative identity revolving around the physicality of books and the act of reading. Readers can identify with a practice or a genre, expressing this through social media posts, joining thematic book clubs or performing bookishness in general, or alternatively distance themselves from books or genres, creating their reader identities in the process. All three of the examples in this chapter support Driscoll’s argument that, while aesthetic conduct can start out as an interior process, “contemporary readers’ aesthetic conduct is active and it is embedded in networks as an extended process that readers perform to themselves and others” (Driscoll, 2024, p. 57).

Driscoll again shows the reader as an active party in Chapter 4, when she discusses the moral conduct of readers, echoing the idea from the previous chapter that performing a certain reader identity is informed by specific values. Chapter 4 on moral conduct takes this idea a step further, and discusses readers’ moral behaviour as comprising three levels. First, Driscoll explains that the act of reading itself is perceived as doing something morally good, setting the expectation of learning something through reading and then using what was learned to achieve positive change in society. Attending literary festivals or joining book clubs are ways for readers to relate to and show their convictions because it allows them to position themselves as partaking in moral acts. On a second level, readers, when engaging with a book, might judge the actions of the characters featured in it, as well as the overarching plot. This allows them to reflect on the story world and thus on their own worlds and lives. Lastly, readers’ moral judgement goes beyond a book’s world and extends to authors and the publishing industry. When considering readers’ influence in that sphere, it is important to keep in mind the different power dynamics at play in the post-digital world and the many diverse ways in which readers express and discuss their opinions. For example, some authors are much more influential than the readers criticising them, making it virtually impossible to impact their career trajectories. Other authors, however, only have a small following or are just starting out. As publishers nowadays look to online spaces for some of their decisions, readers have the power to shut down or accelerate someone’s career. This allows readers to actively participate in structural change to the publishing industry, a sentiment that echoes Driscoll’s emphasis on readers’ agency in Chapter 2.

In the fifth Chapter of her book, Driscoll writes about private reading as self-care, which she wanted to address last, as she argues that this aspect of reading usually tends to receive the most attention. She first addresses eroticism, the blissfulness of private reading moments, and then looks at both deep reading and mindful reading as established practices that are able to have an impact on readers’ well-being. While all of these practices are initially perceived as solitary, they are, upon further inspection, “surrounded by shared experiences” (Driscoll, 2024, p. 136) such as visiting bookstores, consulting reviews and reading group discussions, as we have learned in the previous chapters. Readers’ preconceived notions—shaped by their network(s)—about what reading is and can do, influence their experiences, and they can in turn use these experiences to the benefit of their community. Overall, the book makes a compelling argument for understanding reading in the post-digital age as a *social* endeavour. By characterising only private reading as a form of self-care, though, Driscoll seems to overlook the fact that much of the activities she described in the previous chapters, such as joining a reading group for example, could arguably be conceived of as acts of self-care as well. Furthermore, the types of private reading that are mentioned, to us, do not seem confined to the private realm. For example, the eroticization of private reading is a big part of how readers portray themselves on social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, whereas we are taught in school that deep reading is the proper way to read. These private reading experiences inform much of our social conduct around books and reading, whether it be aesthetic or moral conduct.

We felt that the book offers a welcome perspective to the study of reading, and one that can be especially useful for researchers in empirical studies of literature to reflect on. Within our field, we have the tendency to isolate the reading experience, especially in experimental studies.

Driscoll contextualises the reading experience and thereby gives attention to less-investigated aspects of everyday reading which tend to be neglected within our field, such as the effects of capitalism on people's reading behaviour, for example. Furthermore, she argues for the necessity of investigating reading not just when it is immersive or transformative, but also when it is limited, shaped by commerce, casual or interrupted. However, while taking the reader as a point of departure in her book, Driscoll still looks at a narrowly defined idea of what reading is in the post-digital age, namely book reading. It could be argued that engaging in contemporary digital social reading practices involves more than just reading books. Think of the reading activity involved in engaging with book review platforms, fanfiction platforms, user-generated translation platforms, and reading all the communication about reading on these platforms. And this is not even mentioning the different media formats that books take nowadays, such as audiobooks and videos online of people reading books out loud or other practices that have come to be a part of contemporary readers' activity such as wreading (i.e., writing fanfiction or contributing to another person's fanfiction by commenting on it). How does participating in such activities inform readers' behaviour? The theoretical framework set out in her book could be operationalized to study these aspects of contemporary reading practices with the use of experimental designs, even though the research Driscoll presents herself remains firmly in the qualitative realm.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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