

The Social Reader

As we were revising this discussion, we were distracted by the proceedings of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee regarding the contested nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to assume the Supreme Court Justice appointment vacated by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Especially distracting was the position adopted by the nominee when she described her judicial role as a textualist. As reported in *The New York Times* (Fandos, 2020) on the following day:

As questioning got underway, Judge Barrett described her judicial philosophy, calling herself a strict textualist and originalist in the tradition of her mentor, the late Justice Antonin Scalia.

“In English, that means I interpret the Constitution as a law,” said Judge Barrett. “The text is text, and I understand it to have the meaning that it had at the time people ratified it. It does not change over time, and it is not up to me to update it or infuse my own views into it.”

Asked by Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina and the Judiciary Committee chairman, if it would be accurate to call her a “female Scalia,” Judge Barrett said that he had been a mentor. But she added: “I want to be careful to say if I am confirmed, you would not be getting Justice Scalia. You would be getting Justice Barrett, and that is because not all originalists agree.” (Fandos, 2020, para. 1–3)

We may not identify with the need to approach text with the predisposition of a Supreme Court Justice. Nonetheless, Judge Barrett’s comments bring to the fore the social and cultural milieu surrounding any reading, not just those surrounding a reader intent on a strict, refrained interpretation. Judge Barrett’s assertion that her own way of reading is not a duplicate of even her mentor befits an acknowledgement of the transactional nature of reading—tacitly recognizing how readers engage in a form of interpretation that is a mix of reading cues from the author, an understanding of their own stamp on their reading, and a process of comparing and contrasting with other readers. One might argue that her statement is itself conflicted. First, she says that the text means what it means and what its authors intended for it to mean. She suggested that she does not have the right to give my own slant on it. Then she says that not all originalists agree, implying that they do provide their own slant.

A literacy educator might use her comments to springboard an examination of the history of the study of response from cognitivists and literacy theorists who have explored in some depth the facets of response reflected in her comments. This might range from formalist orientations advocating close reading and self-referent texts (e.g., I. A Richards) to transactional views and theories (e.g., Louise Rosenblatt) and, more recently, a cadre of other theorists (e.g., David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser); educators (e.g., Richard Beach, David Bloome, Judith Green, Jerome Harste, Douglas Hartman, Theresa Rogers); feminists (e.g., Donna Alvermann, Carmen Luke); and critical race theorists (e.g., Cynthia Tyson, Violet Harris, Annette Henry, William Tate).

The study of social reading is analogous to a kaleidoscope, or something akin to an art exhibition involving various traditions. When we invoke social and cultural contexts, we move beyond thinking that reading occurs only in the head of an individual reader, or the notion that reading is just an act of extracting meaning from the text (as if the text revokes the license or necessity of bringing one's own meanings to the task of determining what the text means). Reading, from its earliest origins, has involved transactions among people and communities. Reading is situated socially, culturally, even historically. As such, it entails exchanges that occur at multiple, reverberating levels as readers and authors exchange readings of the text with one another and even other players in the context (the other members of a book club, for example). But the social and cultural go even further: readers tussle with their own earlier readings, authors (as readers) exchange with their own texts; and readers and writers interact with other social and cultural systems at play. Behind any act of reading (e.g., reading signs, reading news releases, reading letters or e-mails, reading opinion essays, reading fiction), a reader considers the author(s) and what the authors are trying to "sell" to the readership—considering authorial intentions, approach, biases, and perspectives. Readers do this all of this as they form their own compositions and contemplate their own views in relation to the text (e.g., see Side Comment III.4a.1).

Side Comment III.4a.1.

In an illustration of how reading involves transactions between people and communities, Cynthia Tyson (1999) described her conversation with an African American fifth grader about a fairy tale:

During an interaction with a fifth grader male student, I asked him why he appeared not to be interested in the stories I read to the class. I will never forget his reply: “There ain’t no Little Red in my hood, and I catch one of ‘dem little piggies, I’m gon’ have a Bar-B- Que.” While his response made me chuckle, we continued to discuss why he did not like fairy tales. His comments suggested that he did not view fairy tales in the traditional ways. (p. 151)

Nowadays, with the advent of social media, these interactions are even more overtly social than in the past. When exchanges are situated across a range of social media, they take various forms and a range of purposes not possible in a more static print on paper setting. In this digital age, we have had to invent a whole new set of metaphors to characterize new activity; terms such as “jazz,” “bazaar-like” and more recently “mangled” have been invoked to explain the various social dynamics at play in the myriad of ongoing exchanges between people across digital spaces (e.g., their various personae, avatars, etc.). As participants interact with one another, a form of theatrical improvisation takes place—as though there are multiple playwrights enlisting multiple characters or personae in their various interactions with others. In the digital realm, our negotiations are mangled, collapsing and ever-changing.

In order to navigate these diverse and multifaceted processes of reading and writing, the social reader does not experience reading and writing in isolation. Even when they are physically alone, they are aware that as readers, they are writers; as writers they are readers; and that reading and writing are done in concert with others in transacting meanings in pursuit of goals. We constantly negotiate (encountering both support and resistance) with individuals or groups, including our inner selves, with whom we communicate, collaborate, or engages. The processes of reading and writing therefore entail matters of positionality and perspective-taking, in combination. They are multilayered, intertextual, and multimodal, occurring across a range of spaces and time.

In other words, social readers are:

- Aware of their own roles, positions, and agency; conscious of and critical reflexive (yes arguing with themselves) with regard to their participation with others (i.e., authors, readers, communities).

- Aware of norms and conventions including being able to discern the intentionality of authors and others including being aware of criteria governing participation in communities as well as the standards sincerity, integrity, transparency, and argument validity (claim, evidence and warrant operating within community discourse registers).
- Able to engage in, navigate, and generate communications that involve transmediation across multimodal and multilayered virtual and real platforms, for a range of purposes including being able to develop and engage with networks—locally, regionally, and globally—for meaningful communication and support.
- Able to participate morally and ethically with others, in both virtual and face-to-face communications.

A compelling example from Doris Lessing, in her introduction to *The Golden Notebook*. In 1973, she offered this vignette:

Ten years after I wrote (*The Golden Notebook*) I can get in one week, three letters about it...One letter is entirely about the sex war, about man's inhumanity to woman, and woman's inhumanity to man, and the writer has produced pages and pages all about nothing else, for she—but not always she—can't see anything else in the book.

The second is about politics, probably from an old Red like myself, and he or she writes many pages about politics and never mentions any other theme.

... The third letter, once rare but now catching up on the others, is written by a man or a woman who can see nothing in it but the theme of mental illness.

But it is the same book.

And naturally these incidents bring up again questions of what people see when they read a book, and why one person sees one pattern and nothing at all of another pattern, and how odd it is to have, as author, such a clear picture of a book, that is seen so very differently by its readers. (p. xvi)

Above all, social readers are engaged in participatory forms of communal meaning making with themselves, others, groups and their worlds. They are reading the text, but they are not just reading the text; instead they are searching for connections and relevance. They are not just reading what they sense an author is suggesting; instead, they are constructing

their own reading in the direct or virtual company of others, either collaboratively or perhaps argumentatively. Reading is more like a collage of conversations with others shouting out ways of corralling complementary and competing interpretations.

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