Motives for Reading

Fan Culture, Pop Culture, and Collaborative Reading Practices

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The study of how and why readers read has become an important sub-field of media and cultural studies. Work in this tradition ranges from the study of the personal associations formed by individual readers as they encounter canonical literary texts to research into large-scale "interpretive communities," such as the fandoms that emerge around popular television shows, films, comics, and literary genres. The way we teach students to read in schools represents one possible way of reading a text, an institutionally specific set of practices that emerge from the field of literary studies. This approach is valuable, to be sure, but may be radically different from what readers do with books when they choose to read them on their own. Indeed, students often experience a disconnect between the two sets of activities. For those students for whom reading in school is a struggle, their displeasure may block them from picking up books in their everyday life. In other words, we may be teaching them not to read even as we think we are teaching them how to read.

So, in this section, I want to call educators' attention to the range of motives and purposes that shape the reading of popular media texts; my hope is to give you some background on the range of different experiences and perspectives your students bring into the classroom. This focus will encourage you and your students to "go meta"—that is, to pay attention to how and why they are reading a difficult book like Moby-Dick. Rather than ignore those elements that make Melville's novel challenging, we want...
you to acknowledge those challenges and to help students broaden their strategies for confronting them. When I studied _Moby-Dick_ in high school, my teacher, Mrs. Hopkins, had a very clear motive for why I was supposed to be reading the book—to find allusions to the Bible—which had little or nothing to do with my own reasons for wanting to read the book, which were that I had enjoyed the film version and wanted to spend more time in Melville's world.

These different motives, in turn, require different strategies for reading. Literary scholar Peter J. Rabinowitz (1985) argues that genre, for example, represents less a category of texts than an approach to reading. He suggests that genre involves "reading as." My teacher was encouraging me to read _Moby-Dick_ as a retelling of the biblical story of Jonah, while I was reading _Moby-Dick_ as the story of men against whales. Rabinowitz argues that the choice of a genre involves alternative strategies for interpretation. First, he talks about "rules of notice" that give priority to certain aspects of narratives as potentially significant while assigning others to the margins. No one can pay attention to every detail in a book as expansive as _Moby-Dick_, but how do we decide what to notice? Second, genre sets "rules of signification" that determine what meanings can be ascribed to the significant details we've identified. How do I know what the white whale means? Third, "rules of configuration" shape the reader's expectations about likely plot developments. We know that when Ahab and his crew find the whale, they are not likely to give him a big hug or fire machine guns or tap dance on his back or try to communicate his songs to visitors from another world. Fourth, "rules of coherence" shape the extrapolations readers make. Once we have read a book, certain questions linger. What, for example, happened to Ahab's son? Depending on our goals for reading, we may be encouraged to speculate further or forget about these loose ends.

Seeking insights into how people read literature, David Bleich (1986) asked male and female students to retell the plot of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." He found significant differences in male and female responses. Male students read for authorial meaning, perceiving a "strong narrational voice" shaping events, while female students "experienced the narrative as a world" that exists beyond the short story. Male students tried to recover what Faulkner meant, while female students got inside the heads of the characters. The male students moved quickly to interpretation even when they were trying to recount the plot, while the female students felt freer to add their own speculations to their account. Not surprisingly, the males' reading strategy is the one most often promoted through the classroom, where the author's voice is seen as more important than the characters, and where recovering meanings is valued more than speculating about what might happen after the story ends. Yet in promoting this strategy, we may be discouraging other forms of reading and motives for reading that are also rewarding.

In one of my early research projects (Tullock & Jenkins, 1995), I looked at three very different communities of readers who were invested in the television series _Star Trek_: mostly male MIT students; mostly female fan fiction writers; and the Galaxians, a group of gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans. The male MIT students were most interested in the technical aspects, classifying episodes based on which body of scientific knowledge they evoked, and using them as a starting point to speculate about future discoveries and innovations in their chosen disciplines. The female fans were much more interested in the strong emotional ties between the characters—romances, friendships, and community bonds. The Galaxians saw _Star Trek_ as a social utopia that embraced diversity. These different motives affected what each group took away from the series. For example, when asked about each of the regular characters, the male MIT students described them as autonomous problem-solvers, identifying what actions they took to "save the ship," whereas the female fanzine writers read the characters through their relationships as mentors, friends, lovers, and shipmates. The male MIT students translated their enthusiasm for the series into "nitpicking," criticizing errors in the science, making models of ships, or playing computer and role-playing games centered on combat situations. The female fans responded by writing stories, especially stories that loosely fell into the romance genre, and making music videos, which likewise focused on the emotional lives of the characters.

**WHAT DO WE READ FOR?**

The web has made it much easier for us to see different groups of readers in the process of reading favorite texts. We can take those insights back with us into the classroom as we think about what might be going on inside the heads of different students, each with his or her own motives that shape what he or she is likely to get out of a book. We might start with the basic question—What are you reading for?—and realize that different readers pay attention to different kinds of information.
Sample Fan Websites

Cataloging and Collecting

Nitpicking
The Continuity Errors Section of the Battlestar Galactica Wiki:
http://en.battlestarwiki.org/wiki/Continuity_errors_

Speculating
Theories on Lost: http://www.theoriesonlost.com/
Survivor: Why They Lost: http://www.realitynewsonline.com/cgi-bin/se.pl?mode=
article=article7926.art&page=1

Recapping
Television Without Pity: http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com

Consider, for example, The Patrick O’Brien Compendium, a website where readers of a popular series of sea novels have pooled information, each tackling a different body of knowledge. On this site, you can see, for example, a breakdown of all the medical issues (wounds and diseases) the characters confronted and how they were cured; other readers have cataloged the ships or developed a time line of the events, researched vintage recipes or produced a glossary of old naval terms. Looking at this site, one can imagine readers going through the books with yellow highlighters, marking different passages. That's precisely what I hope will happen in your classrooms as you encourage students to identify their own interests in Moby-Dick.

As we turn toward other fan websites and discussion lists, we may also pay attention to the different things readers do with texts. For example, another website, now defunct, communicated a medical student's reactions to House M.D. For each episode, he identified the medical issues and practices depicted and critiqued them from his own professional knowledge and experience. Fans call this approach "nitpicking" (see Jenkins, 2007a). While one can have an entertaining episode, which misrepresents medical information, the medical student also takes pleasure in testing his own evolving knowledge against the series.

The Continuity Errors section of the Battlestar Galactica Wiki involves a different form of nitpicking: It is primarily focused on identifying continuity errors, places where the program contradicts earlier information. Fans collectively see if they can spot the mistakes and thus demonstrate their mastery over complex long-form narratives.

Lost is famous for its mysteries and puzzles (Jenkins, 2006b). Whether you like the series or not depends on your interest in these enigmas. Theories on Lost became a place where fans could share and evaluate their theories. Fans might describe this activity as speculation.

For many seasons, Survivor fan David Bloomberg explained why the contestant booted that week lost the game. Over time, he developed some core questions he asked about the contestants' strategies, identifying mistakes they made and, in the process, anticipating which characters will be voted off the island next. The events Survivor depicts have already occurred by the time the episodes reach the air. Survivor "spoilers" seek to determine what happened before they are told by the producers, a complex process which involves a mix of detective work and speculation (Jenkins, 2006a).

A site like Television Without Pity involves another fan practice: the recap. Here, amateur and professional writers summarize what happened for the benefit of those who missed an episode. The tone of this site is snarky—the writers enjoy the series, but part of their enjoyment stems from not taking the series too seriously.

Some of what readers do online looks very much like what readers do in classrooms: They form interpretations, often by tracing allusions to other works, as occurs in one fan's account of religious and mythical allusions in The Matrix franchise.

A striking feature of all these sites is that they represent a social process of reading. Fans go online to talk with other readers who are engaging with the same books and television shows. As they do so, sharing their reading experiences allows them to grow closer, forming friendships with others through their common reading practices. Here, readers may also debate different ways of interpreting shared texts and, in so doing, they often spell out their assumptions about the nature of reading. Fans engage in close readings, citing specific passages, debating interpretations, and constructing arguments to support their analysis. Fans often say that such conversations open a favorite series to new interpretations, allowing them to see things they might have missed and providing them new motives to watch the episodes again.

These fan discussion forums illustrate one of the core new media literacy skills—collective intelligence. These communities of readers operate in a world where nobody knows everything, everybody knows something,
and what is known by any member is available to the group as a whole on demand. The NML white paper defines collective intelligence as "the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. xiv). Pierre Lévy (1997), who coined the term collective intelligence, states very clearly that a networked society is one where each participant develops a distinctive expertise that can contribute to the group's common ventures. People working together and sharing information are able to address questions far more complex and arrive at answers far more quickly than any single member could do. Such a social structure places great value on diversity: If each member contributes his or her own expertise, the community is strengthened by the diversity of its participants.

Right now, very few activities in schools support collective intelligence. Schools are still modeled on the ideal of the autonomous learner; individuals are expected to know everything within themselves and therefore seek nothing from others. To bring collective intelligence into the classroom, we first have to allow students to develop their own expertise and thus to take responsibility for helping the class to understand one aspect of the shared problem. Rather than having the students all read the same book for the same reasons, you can encourage the students to become more self-conscious about what they hope to get out of the book and allow them to pursue very different projects through their reading. In this way, they will not simply be trying to identify what their teacher thinks they should learn. Rather, they will be sharing with the teacher and their class what they discovered from reading the book in their own way.

HERMAN MELVILLE AS PROTO-FAN

A central premise of this book is that all authors were once readers, and their process of reading provides the preconditions for their acts of writing. In the discussion that follows, I will apply the vocabulary introduced above to what Melville does in writing about whaling culture. In other words, I want to read Melville as an enthusiast, perhaps even a fan, of whaling culture who wrote Moby-Dick to share his passion and interest with others.

Speculating

Here is one of the many passages in the book where Melville examines the story of Jonah:

One old Sag-Harbor whaleman's chief reason for questioning the Hebrew story was this: He had one of those quaint old-fashioned Bibles, embellished with curious, unscientific plates; one of which represented Jonah's whale with two spouts in his head—a peculiarity only true with respect to a species of the Leviathan (the Right Whale, and the varieties of that order), concerning which the fishermen have this saying, "A penny roll would choke him"; his swallow is so very small. But, to this, Bishop Jebb's anticipative answer is ready. It is not necessary, hints the Bishop, that we consider Jonah as tombed in the whale's belly, but as temporarily lodged in some part of his mouth. And this seems reasonable enough in the good Bishop. For truly, the Right Whale's mouth would accommodate a couple of whist-tables, and comfortably seat all the players. Possibly, too, Jonah might have ensconced himself in a hollow tooth; but, on second thoughts, the Right Whale is toothless. —Moby-Dick, Chapter 83

In this case, he recounts a conversation among his fellow whaling fans—the old Sag-Harbor whaleman and Bishop Jebb—trying to make sense of contradictions in the source text. Their speculations extend beyond the information given in order to try to reconcile what they know of whales in the real world with what the story tells them about Jonah's encounter with the Leviathan. Contemporary fans would recognize the logic of this exchange: Melville takes an element that doesn't quite work in the original and, rather than discarding it, tries to figure out under what circumstances it might make sense. Fans often describe such creative work as "repairing the damage" created by a distracted artist who didn't think through all of the implications of his or her own story. What if we imagined Jonah inside the Whale's mouth rather than fully swallowed—maybe even inside his tooth? Ah, but these fans have already figured out that the Leviathan must have been a Right Whale, and not wanting to discard all that fan labor, they want to preserve that theory and so they have to discard this new layer of speculation.

NITPICKING

In this case, the speculations also constitute a form of nitpicking: The example above closely resembles the search for continuity errors on the Battlestar Galactica wiki. But we can also see evidence of the kind of interpretive practices demonstrated by the young doctor in training as he critiqued the representations of medical practice on House M.D.
nitpicking comes through most vividly when Melville takes on previous representations of the whale. Here, we see Melville boldly assert his superior knowledge and his desire to "set the record straight," common motives for participation in fan discussion lists:

I shall ere long paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman when in his own absolute body the whale is moored alongside the whaleship so that he can be fairly stepped upon there. It may be worth while, therefore, previously to advert to those curious imaginary portraits of him which even down to the present day confidently challenge the faith of the landsman. It is time to set the world right in this matter, by proving such pictures of the whale all wrong. —Moby-Dick, Chapter 55

But, before he can do so, he must clear away previous representations, in this case focusing on the anatomical inaccuracies created by artists who have had no direct experience of the living beast:

These manifold mistakes in depicting the whale are not so very surprising after all. Consider! Most of the scientific drawings have been taken from the stranded fish; and these are about as correct as a drawing of a wrecked ship, with broken back, would correctly represent the noble animal itself in all its undashed pride of hull and spars. Though elephants have stood for their full-lengths, the living Leviathan has never yet fairly floated himself for his portrait. The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight, like a launched line-of-battle ship; and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations. And, not to speak of the highly presumable difference of contour between a young sucking whale and a full-grown Platonic Leviathan; yet, even in the case of one of those young sucking whales hoisted to a ship’s deck, such is then the outlandish, eel-like, limbered, varying shape of him, that his precise expression the devil himself could not catch. —Moby-Dick, Chapter 55

I am reminded of a recurring feature on Sequential Tarts, a long-standing webzine by and for female comics fans, which regularly posts and critiques unlikely depictions of the female body in various superhero comics. Here, for example, is an excerpt from one tutorial on “Bizarre Breasts” (Malnassy, 2002):

Bizarre proportions are nothing new to comics; be it the desire to cater to the cheesecake crowd or simply the preference of the artist, distorted anatomy has become commonplace. The fact that “professional” artists may utilize distortions in published works is a bit disappointing, but frankly, if they’ve gotten the job the odds are they aren’t going to feel the need to change their style. That’s fine, the world needs laughter. However, what does bother me is the possibility—hell, the reality—that amateur artists are copying this exaggerated anatomy and making these mistakes their own. So, in hopes of reaching those for whom this advice may actually have some impact, I have utilized my meager knowledge of anatomy and admittedly unpolished art skills to bring the world a brief tutorial on one of the comic artists’ greatest challenges: the breast.

I don’t want to push the parallels here too far, but both passages argue against the absurd and inaccurate representation of anatomy that comes from artists who don’t really understand (and may have had limited exposure to) the subjects they are trying to depict.

Cataloging and Collecting

Melville, like modern-day fans, refuses to restrict himself to a single text or even a single mode of representation. As he explains, “There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method” (Moby-Dick, Chapter 82). And indeed, some of the most productive modes of fan interpretation involve rampant interdisciplinarity and free association, creating unexpected juxtapositions of texts, tracing real and imagined allusions to other works, as we saw in The Matrix example above. Melville read everything he could get his hands on—ancient books, religious texts, paintings, scrimshaw, currency, tavern signs, even the stars in the sky. He exhibits here the fan’s fascination with cataloging and collecting:

The more I dive into this matter of whaling, and push my researches up to the very spring-head of it so much the more am I impressed with its great honorableness and antiquity; and especially when I find so many great demi-gods and heroes, prophets of all sorts, who one way or other have shed distinction upon it, I am transported with
the reflection that I myself belong, though but subordinately, to so emblazoned a fraternity. —Moby-Dick, Chapter 82

I particularly like that last bit about becoming part of a "fraternity" of others who share his passions and knowledge, for this phrase conveys the social bonds within fan communities.

**Appropriation and Transformation**

Melville also appropriates and transforms the raw material, retelling classic stories for his own purposes. Consider how he roughly handles the canon in his retelling of the story of Saint George and the Dragon:

Akin to the adventure of Perseus and Andromeda—indeed, by some supposed to be indirectly derived from it—is that famous story of St. George and the Dragon; which dragon I maintain to have been a whale; for in many old chronicles whales and dragons are strangely jumbled together, and often stand for each other. "Thou art as a lion of the waters, and as a dragon of the sea," said Ezekiel; hereby, plainly meaning a whale; in truth, some versions of the Bible use that word itself. Besides, it would much subtract from the glory of the exploit had St. George but encountered a crawling reptile of the land, instead of doing battle with the great monster of the deep. Any man may kill a snake, but only a Perseus, a St. George, a Coffin, have the heart in them to march boldly up to a whale.

Let not the modern paintings of this scene mislead us; for though the creature encountered by that valiant whaleman of old is vaguely represented of a griffin-like shape, and though the battle is depicted on land and the saint on horseback, yet considering the great ignorance of those times, when the true form of the whale was unknown to artists; and considering that as in Perseus' case, St. George's whale might have crawled up out of the sea on the beach; and considering that the animal ridden by St. George might have been only a large seal, or sea-horse; bearing all this in mind, it will not appear altogether incompatible with the sacred legend and the ancienst draughts of the scene, to hold this so-called dragon no other than the great Leviathan himself. In fact, placed before the strict and piercing truth, this whole story will fare like that fish, flesh, and fowl idol of the Philistines, Dagon by name; who being planted before the ark of Israel, his horse's head and both the palms of his hands fell off from him, and only the stump or fishy part of him remained. Thus, then, one of our own noble stamp, even a whaleman, is the tutelary guardian of England; and by good rights, we harpooners of Nantucket should be enrolled in the most noble order of St. George. And therefore, let not the knights of that honorable company (none of whom, I venture to say, have ever had to do with a whale like their great patron), let them never eye a Nantucketer with disdain, since even in our woollen frocks and tarred trousers we are much better entitled to St. George's decoration than they. —Moby-Dick, Chapter 82

Fans might describe what Melville does here with Saint George as a What if? story: What if Saint George had been a seafaring rather than land-loving man? Indeed, we can see Melville as struggling with another fan community over which one of them "correctly" captures what is interesting about this character and his adventures.

But, like many later fans, Melville also struggles with how much fidelity the writer owes to the original source material. The author discusses the ways that multiple whalers approaching the same creature determine who can assert ownership over it, declaring some whales to be "fast-fish," that is, already harpooned and bound by a particular ship, and others to be "loose-fish," that is, free of any binds or constraints and thus subject to being grabbed by whichever ship approaches them first. Melville, then, extends this metaphor to talk about the work of the imagination: "What are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (Moby-Dick, Chapter 89). In other words, Melville is exploring to what degree we get hooked into a story and thus get captured by its author and to what degree our imagination remains unmoored, capable of taking the story wherever we want it to go. In a sense, that's exactly what fans are trying to make sense of when they debate how much they need to follow canon and to what degree they can construct their own fan universe. Read in this way, we can see Moby-Dick, often described as the Great American Novel, as a piece of fan fiction that grows out of Melville's fascination for the whale and his mastery over whaling lore. Drawing on a range of stories, responding to competing representations, Melville constructs his own original fiction, which he asserts better captures what fascinates him about man's eternal struggle against the natural order than previous representations.