

Introduction

Their or, Rather, Our Books

People use valuable resources to access books. They spend time and money to get hold of books, to have them, to gift them, to think about and often read them. They have expectations from books deemed worth procuring, and institutions have developed to meet, encourage, and at times create those expectations; among these institutions are bookshops, both online and off. People go to bookshops and, accepting the risks and logic of commercial exchange, trust that their resources will provide them with satisfied desire. Such a contract enables bookshops, like any other retail operation, to take part in a human drive for satisfaction. Unfortunately, when it comes to books bearing fiction or even literature, the models we have for understanding such behavior emerge from late-nineteenth-century literature studies, based on a critical engagement with the text, validated, in many cases, solely on notions of literary judgment. Such models prevent us from understanding specific historical relationships between non-professional readers and their books.

An alternative would be to think about bookshop users and their fictions in terms of desire, and to examine the books' abilities to negotiate those desires as material objects in a system of economic exchange. The model could be appended to the various histories of printing, publishing, distribution, reading, and authorship that have built up in response to conceptions of the communication circuit, but would aim to account for the experience of books, both social and individual, based around the bookshop as a metonymic site for reading within commodity culture. The risk, however, is that the project could be confused with brute marketization. It might mistakenly be thought of as a surrender of those same literary values that the judgments of literary studies seek to maintain.

That marketization has already taken place. Like the capital-intensive early-modern book market, it pre-dates literary studies. The book is among the oldest of all commodities in the West, as John Frow observes in his study "Gift and Commodity," and its commercially mediated institutions already (re)issue the fiction-bearing objects that literary criticism elects to study.¹ By way of resistance, though, it should be noted that life in commodity culture has not been solely a depressing narrative of exploitation. The period establishing the regulation of desire through transnational market economies was also the period of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American, European, Latin-American, Asian, and African leftism that pushed through every progressive labor-policy step that for many in the privileged West appears now to be such a given. Despite being colonized by the free market, people have taken opportunities for other welfare actions, and currently the breadth of people's experience is far wider than only a reductionist, neo-liberal history in a moment of late capitalism. Not despite but including the economic framing, therefore, the belief that a desire can be satisfied in a bookshop is not only deeply personal and irrational, but also social and political. It is active desire, in the system of economic exchange, that prevents the reader from becoming only a victim of what Adorno and Horkheimer insisted was the "mass deception" of the culture industry.²

By focusing on the bookshop, a distinction comes straightway into play between the academy-generated readings of literary professionals, in contrast to the readings of those living up to the requirements of commodity culture. Leah Price described the two approaches separated by a "gulf," between the distinctive literary-critical reading and the prosaic readings scholars imagine people undertake far removed from the world of scholarship, more recently mapped "on to a division of labour between two disciplines, literary criticism and cultural history."³ But academics are also driven by desires, from inculcating a love of fiction among students to strategic maneuvers in a career plan, and in the bookshop as a metonymic site academics cannot pretend they are not shopping. The literary is subsumed into a continuum, where Austen, Eliot, and Proust are in a bookcase next to Terry Pratchett and George R.R. Martin. Mohsin Hamid and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are along the corridor past Danielle Steel. The bookshop is insatiable. It subsumes all books and it takes in (both positively and negatively) all kinds of aspirations, including access to literary merit.

That there is a distinction in these two approaches to reading has long been recognized. In their refreshing analysis of literary and economic value, and of the history of its false dichotomy, Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon conclude that the discourse in the humanities has been dominated by “a domain model of ‘economics’ and ‘art’ that endlessly worries over their degree of separation or inter-mixed-ness, [and] worries about the dominion of one over the other.”⁴ Its historians place the phenomenon back to at least the early nineteenth century, when “literary society isolated itself in an aura of indifference and rejection toward the buying and reading public” and from which site of production inspired readings attesting to the intelligibility of work could be generated, “while paradoxically excluding the public of non-producers from the entire business of attesting.”⁵ As Ika Willis confirms in her comprehensive history of reception, “The key forces in the modern construction of reading and the reader are, firstly, the privatisation of reading . . . and secondly, the division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of reading, and the way these map onto gender, class and race.”⁶ Part of literary studies’ cartographical task, then, has been to address levels of inclusiveness while continuing, in an echo Alexander Pope’s “horror of literary commodification,” to ‘Guard the Sure Barrier’ against an ever-encroaching economic discourse.⁷

Conversely, on the far side, from where economics encroaches, what were once inalienable objects beyond the marketplace have increasingly become alienable market commodities, in a continual if uneven push “towards the commodification of everything.”⁸ There may be pushbacks—the sale of human bodies is no longer permitted, through anti-slavery laws—but the push has a habit of looking elsewhere: the sale of organs, blood, semen, and unfertilized eggs has become so, with evidence of accompanying kidney bazaars and cesarean sales.⁹ Even emotional empathy has become affective labor to the care service industry. The push may have begun with late-medieval enclosures of common land to create more profit-extracting private space, but it continues with the planet’s atmosphere, which, like ice caps and fish stock, also once belonged to communities, but which in free-market solutions to environmental degradation can now be parceled into commodity units for its “protection,” with charges applied for the right to pollute it. The keenest encroachment comes from the ideological capture of economics by neoliberalism, which seeks to explain the entirety of life according to

economic precepts. Gary Becker, Nobel economist and former president of the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society, sought to apply economic thinking well beyond the realms of the economy. In the systematic calculation of how maximized ends can be met through scarce means, Becker and his acolytes deduced the notion of intra-household bargaining, where family relations were discovered to be nothing less than maximizations of personal utility, rather than, as Ha-Joon Chang observes, relations “between real-life family members, with their love, loathing, empathy, cruelty and commitments.”¹⁰ So pervasive is this application of economic thinking that popularizing volumes can regularly declare how the seeming altruism of parents is actually their “means of investing indirectly for their own old age.”¹¹

Certainly, any ideological pretense to the reified sanctity of literature has long been questioned by sociologies of literature and in literature sociology and by newer historicisms. Critical theory can involve much more besides commitment to literary aesthetic autonomy—the recent volume *The Literary and the Social*, for example, provides a review of such boundary-crossing research.¹² And even high-modernist formalism begins to be explained partly as a result of changes to the regimes of publishing, distribution, and reading.¹³ But under extreme (often financial) pressure, literary study can be tempted to reclaim its allegiance to literary autonomy and lose sight of the strategic warning issued by Heather Love that “retrenchment around disciplinary commitments to the literary is not an effective response to the crisis in the humanities” when based on “humanist arguments that depend on assumptions about the singularity of literature or the ethical value of close reading.”¹⁴ Retrenchment leaves the ground open to other disciplines, only too keen to claim explanatory rights over the satisfaction of human desires. Such a take-over by economics has intensified over the past decades, forcing academics and educators to defend the humanities generally against ambitions to turn HEI (higher education institution) activities into tradable assets under metrics-based New Public Management. An appropriate term is *financialization*. *Marketization* is often used, and to effect, but the term obscures the market’s long history and also that markets are social. Markets since their medieval regulation involve and have always involved people, knowledge, and goods. Financialization, on the other hand, as a term of neoliberalism, aims at reduction into assets. People, their knowledge, and what they identify as goods are reconfigured as assets that can be traded or used for speculation.

In defense of the humanities from this financializing onslaught, the argument often draws back to disinterested literary judgment and away from the money-tainted shop. A spat in the arts section of a liberal British newspaper serves by way of illustration. Following popular outpourings in obituaries to Terry Pratchett, an arts critic asserted somewhat forcefully that life was too short to read Pratchett: “A middlebrow cult of the popular is holding literature to ransom,” he declared and, unlike the works of Günter Grass or Gabriel García Márquez, Pratchett’s were not great books that could change your life, your beliefs, and your perceptions.¹⁵ They were merely potboilers. The article brought an immediate response claiming Pratchett’s books were the opposite of potboilers, and that his works brought with them moral complexity, emotional impact, careful plotting, and urgent humanity.¹⁶ The initial writer later published a retraction, praising some elements of Pratchett’s work but still insisting that it ought not to be considered literary fiction. What both commentators shared, and what was played out within the same arts section, was a common discourse centered on literary merit, and what both were at pains to escape was the territory of the potboiler. One assigned the author to the potboiler and denied him literary merit, while the other wanted to liberate him by asserting literary merit. Their assertions of merit were a matter of judgment based on their professional close readings. But what of the merits of potboilers, which are generated and gained from processes of moneyed exchange in the bookshop? “The literary” does not have a monopoly on merit, nor does it comprise the only constituting lens through which merit can be assessed. There are other merits worthy of attention for anyone interested in the human condition. And is not that condition itself the subject of fiction?

Rita Felski has identified the professionalized interrogation of texts as something distinct from other uses of literatures we might find on a city’s main shopping street, known colloquially as the high street (though she does not present the distinction in the frame of economics). In contemporary Anglo-American, European literary-critical studies, she sees an entropic standardization, where an enthusiastic hermeneutics of suspicion and exquisitely self-conscious interrogation of the text has become *de rigueur*. Reconstructed as two groups, the entropy is classified by Felski into theological and ideological styles of reading.¹⁷ Both forms seek to shore up the distinction between professional and non-professional reading.

The theological reading refers to literature's otherworldliness (secular rather than metaphysical); to its ability to resist concept-driven interpretation and signify what all else in the world cannot. It is found across a political spectrum from Bloom's romanticism, to Kristeva's avant-garde semiotics and Levinian criticism, and can be deemed to be politically transformative. The fissure Felski sees, which invites the deconstructive crowbar, is the task of explaining how such literatures arise from and move back into the world; of why in spite of their otherworldliness they can still infiltrate and inform our lives. The ideological reading points to social conceptions of literature, whereby text is either a function of or an author to ideology. As such, the text is secondary to the social, and the analyst's terms of interpretation are in the business of understanding what the text cannot. Felski's complaint is that the literary text is hauled in to confirm what the critic already knows,¹⁸ and the work is denied the capacity to satisfy new desires by developing our (including the critics') beliefs and commitments.

Paradoxically for the critic, any recoiling from such theological or ideological theorizations is not an option, either, since theory lies in wait: as Felski puts it, "Harold Bloom's assertion that we read 'in order to strengthen the self and learn its authentic concerns' is a quintessential theoretical statement."¹⁹

All the while, bubbling beneath the critical discourse is the realization that people "often turn to books for knowledge or entertainment" and remain stubbornly unwilling to "read literature 'as literature.'"²⁰ These people and the uses they make of the books they purchase are the focus of this study: in all its glorious mundanity or, in Felski's terms, its "heterogeneous and complex microcosms, socially sculpted yet internally regulated complexes of belief and sentiments, of patterns of inertia and impulses towards innovation, of cultural commonalities interwoven with quirky dispositions."²¹ Book purchases made here may accord to the spirit of modern consumerism, but the motives, as Colin Campbell would say, are

anything but materialistic. The idea that contemporary consumers have an insatiable desire to acquire objects represents a serious misunderstanding of the mechanism, which impels people to want goods. Their basic motivation is the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable dramas which they have always enjoyed in imagination.²²

In its simple sense, this study is an investigation of the everyday experience of shopped books, which suggests the interdiscipline known as book history, and rightly so. It sits alongside other historically attuned approaches to literature that Felski suggests are more a productive response than theological or ideological reading. But in attempting to recreate something of past understanding, historical readings run a severe risk of reducing “readers” to a homogenous research object and, in doing so, othering other readers.²³ Like theology and ideology, history ought not to become *our* alibi based on the unsophistication of past readers from whom we are distinct, so the glorious mundanity needs to remain ours.

In terms of politics and ethics, the distinction between readerships has been summarized by James Proctor and Bethan Benwell in a recent study of transnational reading groups and the reception of difference.²⁴ Their aim is to understand relations between disciplines of study in the university and the political domain. One cannot simply generate findings in the academy, they claim, and in the absence of determinable measures they insist they will affect the political domain, as anyone who has provided evidence of social impact from literary studies will know. Such an assumed transference is a political fantasy resorted to by contemporary literary study as a testament to its socially transformative power. The two realms of reading are bridged by neither political fantasy nor aspired-to (theological and ideological) reading practices. As a response, Proctor and Benwell argue that if literary studies are to retain an effective politics they must be self-reflexive about their core practice of reading. They acknowledge an analytical and cognitive approach to professional reading in the academy but then compare this to other motivations and to protocols and procedures undertaken, not by interpretive communities in the specialized cognitive analytical sense, but by “reading communities of practice.”²⁵ By producing a transnational study of these other communities of practice, Proctor and Benwell reveal those communities’ differing but equally valid and valuable reading protocols.

In his “The Ethical practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading,” John Guillory further maps differences between professional and nonprofessional modes of reading. Professional reading requires *work* (compensated by salary) that follows *disciplinary* conventions and requires *vigilance*, which in Kantian terms might be translated as disinterestedness.²⁶ By contrast, lay reading is firstly a practice of leisure. Its motivation is primarily pleasure and the differences of its conventions are noted in differences of occasions and places of reading (in bed, or on tube trains,

or “read” through headphones while commuting). These are two modes of reading, but to invalidate one by the value judgment of the other is to perform an ideological and theological act that should have no place in neutral *sciences humaines*.

The suspicion is that what truly divides and also what resolves the distinction in readerships is concerns about populism and, beneath that, perceptions about power and money. John Conrad described how his father, Joseph, after a day’s writing would sit up at night reading John’s *Boy’s Own Paper*. John knew from the traces of cigarette ash he found between the pages in the mornings. He recalled, too, his father’s more general borrowing of the family’s reading materials, in between the serious business of writing novels. Andrew Glazzard, in whose work this vignette appears, uses the image to underline an exchange between the uncompromising, complex Conrad of early modernism and the Conrad of gripping adventure and espionage fiction.²⁷ Glazzard cites a list of studies that now add to Conrad-the-modernist an appreciation of how more popular forms wove into the authoring and reception of Conrad-for-the-people. Equivalent structures could be drawn for other canon authors: the elements of the comic novel in Joyce; or for George Eliot, whose formal epitome of literary realism *Middlemarch* she insisted be coordinated with the demands of the market, including its clothing in “Dickens’ Green.”²⁸ What Glazzard struggles against, though, is a “widely held orthodoxy that literary fiction and genre [popular] fiction are two separate categories . . . [and] its near ubiquity: across the political spectrum, from Richard Hoggart to Evelyn Waugh, from Theodore Adorno to Q.D. Leavis, cultural arbiters otherwise separated by the widest possible ideological gulfs have united in the view that popular literary culture is a contradiction in terms.”²⁹ On the conservative right, the Arnoldian denigration of popular philistinism comes as no surprise, but on the intellectual left Glazzard traces the phenomenon, too: Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981) names the populist elements in Conrad’s *Lord Jim* as degraded cultural forms; Jeremy Hawthorn and Keith Carabine are cited, too, as finding the popular elements of Conrad to be mere stepping stones to a greater literary modernism. The height of intellectual Marxist hierarchy where popular is held low, Glazzard suggests, is found in the “‘Frankfurt school’ of social and cultural theorists, [who] inevitably see popular fiction as a form of commercialised and capitalist (literary) production.”³⁰ Across the political spectrum from left to right, the distinction comprises, on the one side, a professionalized exegesis

of the literary text, and on the other, an undiscerning public unable to appreciate and, at worst, uninterested in reading great literature.

The struggle over terms is a power struggle in the Foucauldian sense, between reading practices and between ways of using fiction. It is fought throughout a matrix of terms, including “literature,” “fiction,” “book,” “text,” “work,” “value,” “commodity,” “popular,” “reading,” “gate-keeping,” “social transformation,” and “cultural connoisseurship.” Diffused throughout this struggle, I cannot help but believe, is the issue of economic exchange: the fear of it or at least a conviction of its corrupting power, lined against an everyday acceptance by people that economically framed exchange is an effective means of reciprocally obtaining what you need. Economic exchange is the element that both dogs and is evaded by the very category “professionalized literature.” It is the element that will provide the resolution to this study of not specific literatures, but desire-negotiating agencies making best use of their bookshops. But it is also the element that will need to be redefined, because while the humanities worries about economics in the composition of the research objects its studies, institutionalized economics is increasingly accumulating explanatory territory, without ever acknowledging that political force has been a necessary component of both its history and of capital growth.

The study begins by asking what happens when we treat fiction primarily as a traded commodity. Its final answer is not solely inward-looking in defining a new taxonomy of lay reading, but, much to what would be Gary Becker’s disapproval, it also finds the logical necessity of rethinking economics in the post-crash era, or at the least that section of the market that comprises symbolic goods, as a political economy.



This study of books and the wants that readers seek to satisfy through their reading sets its case in the early decades of commodity culture, first in Britain, through the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, at the start of what Martin Lyons calls the golden age of the book. This was the period before radio and electronic mass media added a complexity whose suspected vulgarity persuaded scholarship to study those platforms as something distinct from the literature-carrying book. It was a period when the reading public acquired several new layers and books flowed toward the “lowest” and furthest audiences “desacralized, an everyday object of consumption like soap or

potatoes.”³¹ The study is situated in the UK port city of Southampton, which connected a globalized commercial network of cultural exchange through the mechanism of shipping. The new worlds of Argentina and Brazil, of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa were connected by timetabled profit-generating oceanic trade with the old worlds of Hamburg and London. As cocreators of this network, Southampton people and their machines traded in goods and desires, and in books and dreams: “from carpenter’s nails to chairs, paintings (or more often prints) and books—especially the ideas inside books—as well as people.”³²

Onshore, Sotonians (the all-too-human inhabitants of Southampton) derived a percentage from helping create the network, and when not tending to the production side of this business, they spent their disposable income and leisure time on chasing the same possibilities that were the network’s currency. They dreamed of relief from labor, of pleasure and sex, and of love and children; of power over disliked events, of revenge against enemies, and of justice that might err on the side of favoritism. Reviewing the Christmas holidays, when the network’s desires had been resolutely chased, the 4 January 1899 issue of *The Southamptonian* held that “there has been less serious drunkenness than was ever known during the festive season”; that the “cry of bad trade and little money stirring has been proved utterly false by the crowds attending the places of amusement, the amount of railway travelling, and the clearance of the butchers and poulterers’ shops”; that Sotonians were again looking forward to the weekend’s favorite sports, justifying a full page of “football notes”; and that a major delight would be Southampton *World’s Fair* at the St. Mary’s Drill Hall (more prosaic than its cosmopolitan forebearers) offering “Hart and Rudd comedians, Sam Darling, eccentric character comedian, De Ora the Gymnast, Grand tug of war contest: contests, contests, contests . . . including . . . Grand onion eating contest, mouth organ contest, comic singing contest, lady or gentleman making the funniest face looking through a horse collar, ‘climbing the pole,’ and grand smoking competition; admission to the hall 1d.”³³ That same edition of *The Southamptonian* offered chapter 1 of *The Ruby Ring*, in serial, by Ida Linn Gerard, author of *Caught* and other tales, about Paul Vere and his betrothed Judith, whose expectations on Paul’s miserly grandfather do not go as they hope. Issue number 3 appended to *The Ruby Ring* a further fiction entitled *One of Life’s Ordeals* by R. Silverman.³⁴ Sustained by and sustaining Sotonians, as well as doing both for the city’s book trade—the popularity of *Ruby Ring* helped keep afloat fledgling publications such

as *The Southamptonian*—fiction was as much imbricated in this complex of leisure-time desire as De Ora the Gymnast. Fiction promised a brief freedom from pain and the maximization of pleasure—exactly the terms on which the discipline of neoclassical economics is based, articulated by one of its earliest theorists, William Stanley Jevons: according to Jevons, the proper subject of economics is nothing less than a calculus of pleasure and pain.³⁵ Fiction for Sotonians formed part of a trade in desires and helped construct an economy not so very different from that which continues to touch the city's quays. And it is the nature of those differences or their lack that is the subject of the following chapters.

This Southampton-based study borrows partly from an aspect of cis-history that, to paraphrase David Armitage's definition, investigates a unique location within a world economy and seeks to define that uniqueness as the result of the interactions between local particularity and a wider web of connections.³⁶ Southampton's book retail may be uniquely local, but its particulars are formed *because* it is a node in a larger network of global trade. Such interconnectedness, Armitage suggests, can be most fruitfully applied to the very places most obviously transformed by their global connections: port towns and cities. From its boom period in the middle of the sixteenth century, when trade flourished with ports throughout the Baltic and Mediterranean, Southampton has developed its international reach to include the world, and, if we follow the logic of six degrees of separation, thus potentially to each of the world's book-reading households. Though the study remains ingloriously rooted in a grayed British city, it also knows that it is a boat ride away from New World plains and clear Nordic skies.

The current study does not claim to provide a history *per se*. For a historian, cis or otherwise, the work would begin with the historical material and derive from that whatever narrative it could. By contrast, the current narrative is a twenty-first century construction. The few histories available of Southampton and its book retail trade have been assembled and supplemented with original archival work, but the world it looks back to is seen through a postmodern perspective. More a historically informed cultural criticism, the study shows how book retail around 1900 might be understood if we were to implement a twenty-first-century understanding of theory. Thus, a version of Southampton of the past becomes a test for the robustness of the study's applied theory, and a historical justification for why in future we might begin to rethink the market for symbolic goods along new lines.

Therefore, taking its interdisciplinarity seriously, this study combines its historical research with quantitative surveys, critical theory, and practice-based research. The key research question the study asks is what happens when we treat books like commodities, as all shoppers do. The answer, with several intermediate steps, is that doing so reveals how neoliberalism's presentation of economics conceals the political and cultural constituents of market behavior. Were we to admit the cultural political dimension of market economics, especially in consumption studies of symbolic goods (books), we might be forced to embrace a conception of economics as it is, which is a political economy, and for consistency's sake abandon monetary and fiscal policies based on neoliberalism.

In reaching this conclusion, the study first enlists the historical Southampton High Street into the role of ahistorical metonymic site for life created by commodity culture. Instead of the institution of Art or *Ars Litterarum* constituting literature's frame, on the metonymic High Street commodity culture does the framing, in which reading becomes not a matter of finding meanings "in" texts, but of obtaining gains (through the market contract)—sometimes profound ones: remedies against loneliness, new identities, comforts, and pastimes. But to be more than a mere bridging exercise between the praxis of reading and the realm of the market, the study must then establish this commercially enabled material semiotics as a social praxis, and thus potentially a new kind of economy. This latter aim is achieved by conceiving the praxis as a specific actor network (based on the actor-network theory of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and others), continually (re)creating itself in real time, *a posteriori*. Thus, the politically economic High Street this study constructs has been consistently remade from historical events, including Southampton's retail High Street shops, trade-practice and legislation (such as the Net Book Agreement [NBA]), relationships between actants (those structured by scales of economy and those derived from friendship and love), and most importantly including the voices of the trade's unknown readers—all of which begins to reconstrue in cultural and political terms the demand side to this economy.

Divided into four parts, the study sets out in part 1 its understanding of the High Street, of the readings that take place there, and of the literary and economic theories and analytical methods that have enabled this understanding, along with the tactics and politics behind the study's aims. Part 2 provides a narrative specific to Southampton's book retail around 1900, in the early days of commodity culture, to

provide a historical case that the study's conception of the High Street might measure. If that measure holds, then presumably there would be corroboratory evidence in remnants of readers' experience, which part 3 finds, contentiously, in historical fiction rather than in generalizable archival evidence that has eluded so many studies of reading history. Finally, if we are able to accept that the substantial "if" of parts 1 to 3 is plausible, then part 4 in its revisiting of part 1 can set out what could become a new understanding of reading and consumption, and grounds for a new form of culturally and socially based political economic modeling.

In part 1, chapter 1 develops the concept of reading for gains and introduces "efferent" reading, after the economist Deirdre McCloskey (from Latin *effero* "I take away"). In proposing that the chief gain of reading is identity formation, it brings the study in line with consumption studies, in that consuming significance becomes possible only through reading. Reading is therefore necessary for the consumption of all intangible value, thus explaining why commodity culture *needs* its readers. But unless a challenge can be mounted on the idea of identity formation (in consumption) as a purely individualist pursuit, such reasoning will remain stuck with its masculine Crusoe figure of *homo economicus*, isolated and doggedly pursuing rational self-interest. Conceptions of socially constituted identity, found in proposals such as self-discrepancy theory, are therefore introduced to show how the correlation between consumption and identity formation is impossible without a shared, collective domain that cannot be reduced to the free market's economic individualism.

Chapter 2 opens up the idea of varieties of capitalism and of economic pluralism, the need for which has become vital since the global economic crash of 2007–8, and the adoption of free-market neoliberalism that was both a root cause of the crash as well as its austere putative remedy. The suggestion is that so-called free markets, the antithesis of the cultural and political embeddedness articulated through cultural and literary studies, are themselves regulated political projects. As a test-bed for this proposition, a historical understanding of the retail booktrade is constructed following interactions between its two regimes of value: the market composed of purportedly indifferent financial structures, and the market as a social-political regime with its culturally motivated regulations and agreements—the former through various scales of economy affecting trade, and the latter through iconic regulatory controls such as the NBA. The suggestion is that presumed rational free markets in books are closer to civic markets with a sense of cultural value that is

overt (and which by extension might apply equally to other areas of civic life such as health care, education, and transport).

Chapter 3 returns to the othering and gendering of the High Street shopper, in its reconsideration of the “unknown public.” In parallel to William St. Clair’s influential “Political Economy of Reading,” the chapter examines levels of disposable income available to the unknown public, taking in tramping readers, workhouses, laborers, artisans, domestics, and the “young lady classes,” as well as naming the writers who were “consumed” on the High Street. Chapter 4 follows these outlines in relation to Southampton, providing a history of leisure-time consumption, framed in surprising ways. Because while shopping defines the efferent practice of both men and women, in the negative it is valenced as something women do, duped into buying outputs that can only be commercial, while in the positive it becomes *the* condition that readers of masculinity must be seen to overcome, in works by Conrad, Kipling and the once-phenomenal but now-neglected Francis Marion Crawford.

In part 2, chapter 5 picks up the ambiguity of commodity culture as something both emancipatory and exploitative, but specifically played out between space, place, and time in Southampton. Economic history can often be presented as a linear narrative of unequal but nevertheless incremental improvement, guided by its invisible hand, whereas this study instead presumes a forked history of beneficiaries and casualties with each new development, where our assignment to one of those roles is a result of political decisions, which could and can always be decided in other ways—not an ineffable benign process, but an unforgiving divisioning created by us. This double-edged view of progress is exemplified in Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty* (1879), which asked why, despite revolutionary labor-saving technologies, workers were and are still obliged to live in relative poverty. In this same dual pattern, the market that is Southampton book retail is then shown to be constantly poised between growth and collapse, as is the city’s civic progress, caught between the advances of gas-and-water socialism and the turmoil of industrial conflict. The legacy of hunger and bayonets, in parallel with the progress of municipal socialism, libraries and affordable books, provides a composite frame to the efferent readings of bright and dark futures in technological fictions by H.G. Wells and George Griffith, and in emigratory calls of the New World in women settler narratives. “Progress” can mean progress or poverty depending on your position and gender in the network; and it is the exact same logic that makes credit out of debt, and debt out of

credit, depending on whether you are lending or borrowing, and which turns economic growth into both a benefit and a cost.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the core of the study, apply the study's reasoning specifically to bookselling: providing firstly a historical narrative of book retail through the daily round of duties in a provincial bookshop; secondly in a detailed mapping and narrative of Southampton book retail from 1876 to 1907, comprising its up to twenty businesses located in or around the High Street; and thirdly a narrative of its longest-surviving business, that of Henry March Gilbert and Sons, from 1859 to 2002. Merely one segment of a new and second-hand trade in desires, books were read, robbed, and returned alongside stationery and leather goods, glasswear and dressing cases, with no more "singularity" than any other traded enablers. Outward facing, these businesses occasionally referred to themselves as bookshops, but sideways, upwards, and downwards they helped sustain a complex commercial, political, and cultural network consisting of newsagencies and printers, binders and publishers, and by trading in social improvements and civic careers, as much as tourism and local entertainments.

Part 3, chapter 9, comprises an exercise in practice-based research, in fictionalized but fact-based historical accounts of five visits to Gilbert's bookshop, drawing together the various forces that create each person's estimate of what books will best satisfy their desires. Far from a rational calculation to maximize utility, the consumption choices of these readers are the result of charged personal histories, shaped by factors of class, gender and race, otherwise written out of free-market methodologies based on universal (white) "man."

Part 4 expresses a new understanding of the consumption of books based on framed historical evidence, beginning with chapter 10, which considers how consumption of symbolic goods might be re-thought of as reading, and how, if reading is always inter-textual and social, it cannot be accounted for through the rational methodological individualism of neoclassical economics. With such a strategy, consumption becomes social reading, thereby rendering the key masculine figure of *homo economicus* much less useful than his market-active sister, *homo narrans*. From its survey of entertainment studies, the gains of reading for entertainment are then given greater depth beyond mere hedonic pleasure. Using a thick description of what happens when we entertain ourselves with literary texts, and empirical qualitative and quantitative studies of non-professional reading, I make a cautious proposal of what are the

chief gains from reading: personal encouragement, relaxation, guidance, but also bibliotherapeutic remedies for boredom, loneliness, and pain, as well as very much the need for socialization and society building. If our society is an ongoing imaginative creation, then efferent readings are instrumental in the sustaining of it.

Chapter 11 addresses actor-network theory and the use of framing, examining how the value of symbolic goods, both in use and exchange, can be derived from relations within the social network, and how commodity culture provides those relations with a longevity sufficient to create a “market.” Thus constituted, fiction becomes a networked event, comprising people, places, and bibliographic objects. A fiction becomes a Net Work, whose force is derived through social interactions rather than from any intrinsic meaning of the text. Through this application of network thinking, the chapter can therefore address the problem of recovering evidence of historic readers, whose thoughts are often no longer extant, but whose networks that were constructive of them are still active. In the same way that it is meaningful to talk of an Epsom Derby, as a node in the network of dreams for easy wealth by Southampton readers, it is meaningful to talk of a durable coincidence of leisure time, books, and disposable income that we designate in High Street bookshops. If that thesis can be accepted, it is then possible to understand the five visits to Gilbert’s from part 3 as more detailed articulations of this chapter’s surprising factual case studies of reading experience, of people reading Tennyson, Marx, and Patrick Hamilton’s much-lesser-known *Hangover Square*, as evidence of not only against-the-grain efferent reading but of the power it has to intertwine with cultural and political forces.

Finally, it remains for chapter 12 to confront the disjuncture between the cultural network in which symbolic goods perform, and a regime of economic values that is purportedly apolitical—resolvable if we consider that the account of the market given by economics is inadequate when it omits the market’s cultural composition. Working through the ever-mounting objections to the institutionalized neoclassical economics (inconstancies that neoliberalism exploits), the study calls for a new paradigm of economics that might begin with the study of consumption of symbolic goods epitomized in the history of the retail book trade.

In conclusion, it is proposed that the sure barrier that divides a regime of literary-critical distinction on the one hand and popular commodity values on the other is a false barrier based on prejudice around populism and on the misconceptions of economics. Furthermore, if the barrier is

maintained by people struggling for ownership of the progressive qualities of book-borne fiction, then the struggle is a contradiction in terms. Far better would be a combined effort to provide a proper account of exchange in the rich network of books, places, and people in commodity culture that the truncated narrative of neoclassical economics has rightly called but inadequately understood as “the market.” From that effort, we might be able to create a social description of human exchange and consumption, otherwise called a *political economy*, in which aggregated market behavior is replaced by consensus, and self-interest by whatever it is we, collectively, choose to be the most important of our desires. If this study were a B-movie, as some commentators may end up claiming, it would have a pithy strapline, voiced in gravelly baritone: the film poster would show a corporate edifice of glass and steel, beneath which a young girl holds a cheap paperback; the strap would run “When the book of the world is closed, ask a reader.”