



James Procter and Bethan Benwell. *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference*

James Procter and Bethan Benwell. *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference*. New York: Palgrave, 2015. xiv, 274p. ISBN 9781137276391. US \$95.00.

Scholars and students of reading history and practices have a significant new resource in *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference*. An impressive large-scale, multi-year, and transnational study of book club talk, it provides us with a credible, intellectually rigorous account of reading reception.

The book is an ethnographic study of 30 different international book clubs' talk, recorded and analyzed during the first decade of this century. Book clubs were recruited to read and discuss *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith, *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, and *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy, because these novels "have found highly receptive (and highly critical) readers among both professional and lay audiences" (11). Other novels found their way into the project as book club or mass reading event selections. Based on the close reading and analysis of hundreds of hours of recorded book talk, Procter and Benwell organized the book into six thematic chapters.

The stand-alone introduction historicizes the study in the wake of September 11, discusses the selected novels as "metropolitan" novels being read by non-metropolitan readers, and positions lay reading and professional reading as distinctive social formations that are informed by ideas of location and place, realism, and the literary marketplace. Each subsequent chapter takes up these themes, concluding with an illustrative case study of readers' complex voices.

Chapter 2, 'Professional and Lay Readers,' uses the talk about Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, to illustrate that professional and non-professional readers respond to social power inequities through their own conventions. That is, reading is not "...straightforwardly subjective, but becomes operative and meaningful through the institutions, genres and ways of speaking, communities and regimes of value that shape reading both inside and outside the academy" (50). The groups who took part in the study transverse four continents, so Procter and Benwell are able to interrogate the complex role that location has in metropolitan and non-metropolitan readerships. Chapter 3, 'Remote Reading,' illustrates that readers consistently use their own location in textual meaning-making - that is, readers "read in terms of roots as much as routes" (97). Chapter 4, 'Reading and Realism,' challenges heretofore one-dimensional definitions of "the reader" by showing



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that location plays a large role in how readers interpret and articulate “reality.” Chapter 5, ‘Reading and the Literary Marketplace,’ demonstrates that readers are suspicious of literary “hype,” and explains the gulf between ordinary readers and the literary establishment, who blame each other for the commodification of literature. Chapter 6, ‘Reading as a Social Practice: Race Talk,’ deploys close linguistic analysis to demonstrate that readers use language they know is “common-sense anti-racist” (202) to adhere to the norms of their groups, and that they continuously negotiate meanings through this talk.

Procter and Benwell illustrate well through accessible writing and useful theorizing the role of reading in a post-9/11 world. They rightly argue that their study is unique in that it involved “comparative emphasis on a series of geographically dispersed, ethnically diverse texts, and readers viewed within transnational circuits of exchange and consumption” (1). It is also unique in its careful attention to the distinctions between professional and non-professional readers’ textual interpretations of ‘world literature.’ There is also an accessible overview of their research methodology in an appendix, which would serve well as a course reading in reception studies.

DeNel Rehberg Sedo  
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