

# A Feeling for Books

THE BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB,  
LITERARY TASTE, AND MIDDLE-CLASS DESIRE

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*For my teachers*

*and*

*my students*

*and especially in memory of*

*Russel B. Nye*

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Acknowledgments ix

Introduction i

PART I.

IN THE SERVICE OF THE GENERAL READER

Chapter 1. A Certain Book Club Culture 21

Chapter 2. A Business with a Mission 49

Chapter 3. The Intelligent Generalist and the Uses of Reading 88

PART II.

ON THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLEBROW

Chapter 4. The Struggle over the Book, 1870-1920 127

Chapter 5. A Modern Selling Machine for Books:  
*Harry Scherman and the Origins of the Book-of-the-Month Club* 154

Chapter 6. Automated Book Distribution and the Negative Option:  
*Agency and Choice in a Standardized World* 187

Chapter 7. The Scandal of the Middlebrow:  
*The Professional-Managerial Class and the Exercise of  
Authority in the Literary Field* 221

Chapter 8. Reading for a New Class:  
*The Judges, the Practical Logic of Book Selection, and  
the Question of Middlebrow Style* 261

PART III.

BOOKS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Chapter 9. A Library of Books for the Aspiring Professional:  
*Some Effects of Middlebrow Reading* 305

Afterword 352

Notes 361

Sources Cited 397

Index 411

*A section of illustrations follows p. 186.*

I finally joined the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1975 as a graduate student in English. Before that, throughout high school and in college, I had imagined becoming a member every Sunday morning as I pored over the club's full-page ads on the back of the *New York Times Book Review*. Four books for a dollar. Every week I would mentally fill out the coupon with the numbers of the four books I would select could I afford to join. I assumed that as a high school student, though, and later as a work-study undergraduate, I hadn't the resources to take up the club's offer, even though the required future commitment of four books a year seemed entirely reasonable. So I contented myself by imagining what it would be like to acquire those four new books, to hold them, to smell them, to possess the unmistakable treasure they certainly contained. The books offered to me by the Book-of-the-Month Club were no less promising, no less magical than those that had lined the shelves of the Englewood Public Library, where my mother had taken me every week from the time I was three or four. If anything, their representation in postage-stamp size suggested that their power might be even more concentrated. The alchemy they would perform on a suburban girl from New Jersey might be even more thorough, more permanent, more deeply transformative than that effected already by the plain, sturdy, library-bound books of her early childhood.

Significantly enough, it was not the offer of the four "free" books that eventually enticed me to become a club member once I was more solvent financially. By the time I actually mailed the coupon three years into graduate school, I had learned to disparage the club as a middle-brow operation offering only the come-on of free bestsellers to people who wanted only to be told what to read in order to look appropriately cultured. What I coveted was the *Concise Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. I had learned of its existence from a professor whom I particularly admired, the faculty member responsible for teaching the history of literary criticism, a course newly prestigious in 1975 as the first wave of what became known as continental theory made its way across the Atlantic. When he referred to it familiarly as "the *OED*" and everyone else in the seminar seemed to understand what he was talking about, I recognized that here was another mark of the distance that separated me from those more authentically cultured. When someone in the class observed

with exaggerated incredulity that he had actually bought the *OED* as a premium from the Book-of-the-Month Club for \$39.95, I made a mental note to look for the offer. I returned the coupon, finally, not to keep up with what the club touted as "the most talked about books," but in order to acquire this obviously indispensable accoutrement of the cultured, intellectual self. It did not occur to me then that the organization my academic peers and I were all so eager to dismiss had ingeniously managed to turn our snobbery to its own purpose. It had secured our financial consent to buy four more books at full price by gratifying our desire to appear even more intellectual, to exhibit higher taste than that of the typical book club member by acquiring an arcane dictionary so compact and dense with cultural history that you could only read it with a magnifying glass.

At the time I had no idea that my act was being duplicated by countless other would-be academics because I was too embarrassed to admit that I did not already own the *OED*. So I read the monthly catalog in private, regularly refused the monthly selection, and thereby exercised what I would later learn the Book-of-the-Month Club called my negative option. But I also bought a lot of books. In fact, at one point I had amassed something like fifty-odd bonus credits, credits offered by the club to encourage me to purchase discounted dictionaries, art books laden with color prints, and huge, coffee-table books about gardens, exotic cities, animals, and home decorating styles. Although I rarely used those bonus points, they continued to mount up because I bought a large number of the alternate selections offered in lieu of the designated book of the month. I bought cookbooks, novels by women writers, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, an arty edition of *Moby Dick* with fancy woodcuts, and even a copy of *Roget's Thesaurus*. In truth, I had no trouble finding books to buy. But as I made my way eagerly into the literary branch of the academy, I also deliberately mastered its daily routines, participated in its habitual forms of gossip and self-discipline, and internalized its conceptual grids and evaluative hierarchies. As a consequence, when the *OED* was mentioned (as it frequently was) and we admitted with staged irony that we all had acquired our copies through the Book-of-the-Month Club, I concurred (I thought matter-of-factly) with everyone else in the additional, dismissive observation that of course it was impossible to find anything else good to buy from the Book-of-the-Month Club. In my case, though, this was not true.

I tried hard to keep my voracious taste for bestsellers, mysteries, cookbooks, and popular nature books a secret—a secret from everyone, including the more cultured and educated self I was trying to become. I told myself I only read the stuff because one of my fields of specialization

was American popular culture and I needed to be familiar with the most widely read books of the time. With grim determination I restricted this reading to late at night just before bed and devoted long daylight hours to the business of learning to describe the aesthetic complexities of true literature. What I thought I was doing was acquiring the language and repertoire of analytic techniques called for implicitly by the inherent features of self-evidently great works of literary art. But I was troubled by my clumsiness. This was not a language I felt very comfortable with or wielded naturally with any sort of grace or independence. Even more artificial than the second language of French I had mastered somewhat successfully as an undergraduate, the language of aesthetics and taste seemed a lifeless, abstract set of rules to memorize rather than a supple collection of expressive tools for elaborating my responses to good books. Although I inferred from seminar discussions that I ought to prefer Henry James to Anne Tyler, Faulkner to John Le Carré, Pound to Carlos Castañeda, and *Gravity's Rainbow* to *The Thorn Birds*, I could not always discipline my preferences as I thought I should. I still liked the books I read at night a lot more than the books I read for my classes.

I continued to read that high literature, though, and endeavored diligently to duplicate the particular styles of reading displayed by the English Ph.D.'s I saw all about me. Gradually I managed to acquire a new set of interpretive moves—techniques, really—for rendering the difficult and obscure language of the books I was reading comprehensible, if not entirely transparent. When those texts yielded to my efforts, efforts which included the supplying of intertextual references, the tracing of symbolic patterns, and the provision of a rationale for the narrative structure of the piece, I took a kind of reserved pleasure in my own mastery. Eventually I developed an appreciation for literary modernism, especially that of Henry James, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. But that appreciation, no matter how intense, was always combined with an intellectual distance connected to the manner in which I had acquired this new competence, that is, in school classrooms and under the sway of authoritative experts. As a consequence, my new tastes somehow failed to duplicate precisely the passion of my response to those other, suspect, supposedly transparent, popular books. Those books prompted physical sensations, a forgetting of the self and complete absorption in another world. The books that came to me as high culture never seemed to prompt the particular shudder, the frisson I associated with the books of my childhood, because they carried with them not mere promise alone but also a threat, the threat

that somehow I might fail to understand, might fail to recognize their reputed meaning and inherent worth. I developed, as a consequence, an aloof, somewhat puzzled relationship to "Literature" and to the ways of reading required and rewarded in my graduate seminars. I recorded that puzzlement, finally, in a highly academic, theoretical dissertation titled "A Phenomenological Theory of the Differences between Popular and Elite Literature." Those differences I could only conceive at the time as inherent to the texts themselves, as a function of particular textual properties. When that dissertation won for me official entry into the profession and a job at an Ivy League university, I knew it was time to let my Book-of-the-Month Club membership lapse. I sent in my resignation.

At the time I had no idea that the first half of my professional life would be spent attempting to comprehend and to explain the nature of the distance I had traveled between a small tract house in suburban New Jersey, furnished with only one small bookcase and *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Woman's Day* on the coffee table, and a lectern in front of a literature class at the University of Pennsylvania, an institution founded by Benjamin Franklin. Neither did I recognize that what had fostered that journey, my own cultural education in town libraries, public schools, and the classrooms of a land-grant university in the American Midwest, was the actual subject of my dissertation. It took me the better part of fifteen years to articulate that what I had wanted to understand was not how some books were necessarily better than others. What I was really after was why some people, people like me, failed to recognize naturally and effortlessly the supposedly obvious differences discussed so confidently by professors who appeared genuinely moved by Ishmael's damp November of the soul and by the epiphanies of Stephen Daedalus but utterly disdainful of the trials of Silas Marner and Clyde Griffiths, not to mention Scarlett O'Hara or Marjorie Morningstar. In fact, my dissertation would remain unrevised and unpublished, wholly inadequate to the feelings of cultural exclusion, longing, and legitimation I wanted to explain. I abandoned it for another, more manageable way of approaching the topic of books, reading, and literary taste; I turned to the study of why women read romances. I did not take up the subject of the dissertation again until I had crossed paths with the Book-of-the-Month Club once more in an encounter I insisted at first on calling serendipitous, the chance discovery of an interesting subject and a useful body of data.

Only in the long effort to write of the history and people behind those magical, talismanic, postage-stamp books have I come to recognize why this subject, particularly, and at that moment, especially, seemed intellec-

tually compelling and fraught with possibility. For in attempting to explain the remarkable longevity of a club that uses sophisticated marketing techniques to sell not only individual books but the very idea of taste itself, I have found myself unable to condemn the organization in any simple way for commodifying what I was taught in graduate school should never have been commodified by the market in the first place, that is, literature, art, and culture. Instead, in attempting to reconstruct the motives and intentions driving not only the club's founders but its subsequent judges, editors, and subscribers, I have continually encountered not merely the insistent desire to rise socially through any means available but also deep-seated longings for the possibilities of self-articulation and the search for transcendence promised by education and by art. Of course, those desires, here excavated through the use of ethnographic techniques and historical methods, may be little more than the ventriloquized projection of my own desires, which propelled me to renounce my passion for bestsellers, detective stories, and novels about women in favor of the approved tales of Isabel Archer, Jay Gatsby, Benjy Compson, Thomas Sutpen, Thea Kronborg, and Oedipa Maas. Even projected desires have a history, however, and it is the larger social history of the desire to display the tasteful signs of learning and education that I have been moved to tell as a consequence of my reencounter with the Book-of-the-Month Club. This book, then, is the result of my effort to understand the origins, the substance, the particular promise, and the multiple effects of what has been called middle-brow culture in the twentieth-century United States. That culture was aimed at people like me who wanted desperately to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate.

The original impulse behind this book also had something to do with my own imperfect conversion to the secular religion of great literature. My conversion was imperfect, I suspect, not only because I selected popular culture as my area of specialization but also because I continued to harbor a secret but suppressed desire to read in a less cerebral, less aesthetically focused way than the one I was taught in graduate school. My inchoate doubts about the universal value of the touchstones we were encouraged to revere first began to coalesce into an idea during my work with the romance readers I was interviewing for my first book. Those readers eloquently defended their preference for a genre that literary critics dismissed as simple, formulaic, and among the most debased of all popular forms. Slowly they demonstrated to me that, for them, romances were not only subtle and varied but immediately relevant to the conditions of their daily lives. They showed me that romance fiction constituted a complex,

reader of  
major literature

living literature in the context of their day-to-day concerns, and this only increased my doubts about the intrinsic status of textual complexity and the purported universality of the sacred literary canon. Those doubts, in fact, were the source of my first, early desire to investigate the Book-of-the-Month Club and its membership. Recalling from my days as a member that the club sent out many different kinds of books, I surmised that its subscribers might be used as a way to study the possibility that different people evaluated books differently because they came to them with different backgrounds, different tastes, and different needs. My goal initially was to search for what I called variable literacies, that is, divergent ways of reading, using, and evaluating books.<sup>1</sup>

I found myself soon sidetracked from this concern with the club's members as I began to focus more insistently on the organization itself and on the day-to-day process of selecting books to be sent out. This happened, I now think, because I found the individuals who worked within the organization both oddly familiar and significantly different from the group of literary intellectuals I admired who constituted my academic peers and whose approbation I sought professionally. The Book-of-the-Month Club's editors proved compelling to me because they talked about books with a kind of intense fervor and expansive pleasure I had not heard since my conversations with the librarians of my childhood. They were enthusiastic and openly passionate about books, not deliberately reserved or self-consciously ironic about their own tastes as were so many of my academic friends. I was haunted, in fact, by the elaborate and eloquent reader's reports written by the club's editors about every manuscript they evaluated for selection and that they gave me to read as a way of understanding what they were about. Those reports constituted the very heart of the Book-of-the-Month Club operation. Not only did they facilitate the day-to-day business of selecting books for distribution, but more important perhaps, they fostered the definition of an imagined community? of general readers, both within and without the club, who were fascinated not by the aesthetic intricacies of verbal compositions or by the challenge of a unique figural language or even by a new way of representing experience. Those readers, rather, were understood to be captivated by books in all their immense diversity and by the manifold pleasures of buying them, owning them, reading them, and using them. For the Book-of-the-Month Club editors, the world of the literary encompassed much more than the category of belles lettres that the word "Literature" had marked off in graduate English. Less pieces of textual criticism and exegesis than highly personalized accounts of what might be called "experiences with books,"

their reader's reports exhibited a remarkable evaluative generosity and an appreciation for all kinds of printed products and the different uses to which they could be put. Those reports constituted my first window on the internal operations of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

It is essential to acknowledge here that the Book-of-the-Month Club reader's reports came to me not simply as documents in a research project but also as the evocative emissaries of a personal past. That past, deeply marked by the pleasures of constant reading, generated my desire to immerse myself in what my graduate student friends called "serious literature." However, because I read the kind of books I did before I set my sights on the high literary, I was expected to disparage and to abandon that past by my chosen profession, deeply invested as it was in constructing and enforcing the boundaries of cultural hierarchy. That profession sought to maintain not only its right to specify what constituted literary excellence but also its particular, highly technical conception of the literary itself.<sup>2</sup> What I have been allowed to revisit, then, with the assistance of the editors at the club, is a time before my entry into graduate education in English, a time when I read fiction and nonfiction, genre books and bestsellers, and fashion magazines and *Reader's Digest* indiscriminately and all for the particular pleasures they promised and the sensations they might convey. More than the subject of a distanced and analytical scholarly history, the Book-of-the-Month Club stands for me as the symbol of an earlier moment in a personal past and equally as evidence that the literarily trained, professional self I thought I had become is, in fact, still ambivalent and profoundly marked by the resolutely heterogeneous components of a contradictory past.

I have heard echoed in the reader's reports at the Book-of-the-Month Club my own early preference for the rush of a good plot and for the inspiration offered by an unforgettable character as well as an appreciation for the physical properties of the book as a treasured object. Similarly, in the editors' and outside readers' unselfconscious enthusiasm for the expression of deep sentiment and for the information, illumination, and enlightenment offered by individuals specially skilled as authors, I have recalled a time in my past when the act of reading was propelled more by a driving desire to know, to connect, to communicate, and to share than by the desires to evaluate, to explicate, to explain, to discriminate, and to judge. Books, then, stood for me as signs of longing for absent things, for the thrill of wider experience and the promise of greater knowledge, rather than as the occasion for an accomplished performance of the self in the act of delivering an assured interpretation or judgment. It was the Book-of-

the act of  
reading



the-Month Club's reader's reports, therefore, with their emphatic focus on the variegated promises and pleasures of reading as a temporal act that gradually but insistently turned my attention away from middlebrow literature as an aesthetic object alone to a consideration of the subject of reading—to its texture, its variability, its uses and effects—and to the significance it holds for those who involve themselves in it. What preoccupies me now is the effort to understand the peculiar cultural power associated with a particular constellation of behaviors, that is, the activities of acquiring, owning, reading, and talking about books in the United States in the twentieth century.

Of course this revision and even the narrative offered here as a personal prologue to it are equally the product of a cataclysmic upheaval in the world of literary studies, an upheaval whose effects had only just begun to emerge in 1985 when I embarked on this project. That upheaval has produced profound challenges to older ways of conceiving literature as an honorific category and to related ways of justifying its professional study. I suspect, in fact, that the disputatious, stringent, recalcitrant voices behind movements such as feminist criticism, reader response theory, psychoanalysis, a revived Marxist criticism, and cultural studies solicited my identification in part because they duplicated the sense of distance I already felt from high culture in spite of all of my efforts to seek access to its mysteries. These various contemporary critical discourses have provided me with a set of useful but often contradictory languages that I have drawn on in my ongoing effort to give material form to what had only been an inchoate feeling before, the puzzlement I felt in the face of valorized texts I could only labor through, the sense of distance I experienced from the very high culture that my English Ph.D. had declared, at least officially, to be mine. I stress the plural "languages" here as a way of underscoring the fact that I have *not* managed to construct a single, coherent intellectual perspective or method out of my particular reading of these disparate literatures. This introduction is not a theoretical manifesto describing, legitimating, and recommending a particular master code or a single set of objectively existing, automatically duplicable, or universally applicable procedures for analyzing cultural institutions and their consequences. Rather, it is an effort to provide some materials for a genealogy of a self-divided narrator, who can, and often does, recount both the receding events of her past and her most immediate situation from different and differently fruitful perspectives.

In fastening initially on my subject as a way to study the possibility of multiple literacies, it now seems to me that what I was after at the Book-

of-the-Month Club was the very ground on which I myself habitually but unconsciously stood when I maintained that small measure of critical distance from high culture and secretly wondered why it was necessary to evaluate every book according to a single set of aesthetic criteria. This realization about the nature of my interested investment in my subject developed only gradually, however, in the course of the ten years or so it has taken to complete this project. To begin with, I discovered that the nature of daily practice at the Book-of-the-Month Club was itself implicitly constructed with an eye toward academic ways of evaluating books. Middlebrow culture, apparently, defined itself, first, against academic ways of seeing. Then I learned later that my history of reading with the Book-of-the-Month Club was a good deal longer than I had suspected. In effect, I discovered that my education through middlebrow culture and to its particular preferences may well have provided the source of my skepticism about the secular religion of high culture. It took much longer, however, to understand the consequences of that fact and to find a way to use that recognition here.

When I first began to travel regularly to the editorial offices of the Book-of-the-Month Club in midtown Manhattan, I was struck by the similarity between the editors and the literary professors who were my colleagues. In addition to the fact that the editors dressed more like professors than the lawyers and accountants in three-piece suits who filled their building's elevators, they also displayed very similar vocabularies and ways of talking and conversed with knowledge about literary traditions, the standard canon, and well-known "serious writers." I was taken aback, then, when attending my first editorial meeting where alternates to the official book of the month were to be discussed and selected, by the fact that several of the editors dismissed different books under consideration as "much too academic for us." Not only was this criticism repeated regularly thereafter, but the editors occasionally embellished what was, for them, a kind of epithet, by using it in conjunction with modifiers such as "desiccated," "too technical," and "highly specialized." The academic, it gradually became clear, was something the people at the Book-of-the-Month Club defined themselves against. They used the word "academic" to dismiss books they did not like in much the same way my academic colleagues and I had used the word "middlebrow" to dispense with texts we judged inadequate.

It began to occur to me, then, that despite the traditional claim that middlebrow culture simply apes the values of high culture, it is in fact a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English



departments for the last fifty years or so. More than anything else, it may be a competitor to English departments for the authority to control reading and to define the nature of literary value. I also realized that the ubiquitous subject called "the general reader," who surfaced again and again in editorial discussions at the Book-of-the-Month Club, was integral to its self-understanding as an organization and to its daily practice. Moreover, I also began to suspect that the very term "general reader" had perhaps evolved historically precisely as a rejection and critique of some other reader, presumably a reader not general but focused, professional, technical, and specialized. The general reader was most obviously *not* the academic reader. At that point I began to suspect that the Book-of-the-Month Club looked so interesting to me in part because it enabled me to express in displaced fashion my own disaffection with the professional reading required of a literary academic.

This conjecture was strengthened by my growing sense of identification with the editors at the club. Listening to them talk of the visceral pleasures of being immersed in a book reminded me of intensely resonant scenes of reading from my own past. When they groped for the right words to describe the peculiar state that reading could induce in them, the abstract words they settled on, such as "absorption," "escape," or "captivation," evoked not ideas but highly specific and richly realized moments from my own history with books. The walls of the club offices would give way imperceptibly, then, onto the high-ceilinged, adult reading room of the Englewood Public Library. The straight-backed desk chair I was sitting in would become the rickety, yellow chaise lounge on our back patio that I sought out again and again on long, humid summer evenings after dinner in order to read. The titles they recalled and the way they recalled them would set in motion a kind of internal whispering. What I heard murmured in the background was a private litany of titles that had once deeply moved me in the ways they were describing—*Lorna Doone*, *Death Be Not Proud*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Miracle Worker*. I was puzzled by all this remembering and worried about what it all meant. I was especially troubled by the peculiar, triumphant feel of these memories, a sense of vindication almost, as if the editors' talk suddenly justified a past of which I had learned to be ashamed.

It was easy enough to discount my private meditations as irrelevant to the scholarly project that engaged me until a moment about midway into my fieldwork year. In trying to read systematically sixty years' worth of the club's catalog, the *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, I discovered that I had actually read more than fifty of the titles sent out by the Book-of-the-

Month Club in the years between 1950 and 1963. Clearly, my history with the club was much more extensive than I had supposed. I may not have belonged officially to the club, then, but I had read an awful lot of what it recommended. Some of the titles I encountered in the *News* had been among my childhood favorites.

Until I remembered these specific titles in the context of studying the Book-of-the-Month Club and middlebrow culture, I had no idea that they had done anything other than simply propel me forward into a different future, a future marked by educational transformation and therefore by the evolution of a different self with different tastes, beliefs, and values. I had thought, in other words, that what those books had done was to enable me to leave them behind. Recovering them, however, while simultaneously reading the editors' reports and while trying to think systematically about reading and cultural hierarchy, it occurred to me that although those books may well have launched me into a future, they must also have left a heretofore undetected sediment, a silt of desires, preferences, and tastes. Those particular preferences, perhaps, had not been eroded or absorbed into the foundations of the educated self I had managed to build on those sands. As I raced through catalog descriptions of book after book, it seemed disturbingly clear that the expectations they had cultivated within me had not simply been thrown over or replaced by the taste for the exclusively aesthetic complexity, irony, and ambiguity I had cultivated in graduate school mainly by imitating the reading strategies and evaluative practices of those professors I admired. It now seemed that those expectations and desires may well have persisted. Those books and their reading had left what Michel Foucault has called the "stigmata of experience," marks both on and in a sentient body that forever after bears within it the capacity to respond, to react as that first act of marking had called forth.<sup>3</sup> Taste, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has tried to explain, may not simply be figuratively corporeal but may be quite literally so. As such, it may be only minimally open to transmutation.<sup>4</sup> Conceivably, my experience with so many of the books the Book-of-the-Month Club had selected had produced a set of tastes and expectations that were not fully engaged or completely met by the reading I did as a professional.

My intensifying sympathy with the views expressed so thoughtfully by the Book-of-the-Month Club editors made me aware of how much I was a product of middlebrow culture. But what, I wondered, did that mean? Critics of the club traditionally suggest that it either inspired consumers to purchase the mere signs of taste or prompted them to buy a specious imitation of true culture. Was that all I had garnered from the club? I

did not think so. But what exactly had those books conferred on me? The elaborately detailed nature of my recollections suggested that some of the books at least had changed me profoundly. But in what ways? And did I want to defend middlebrow culture as a result?

From this moment of crisis on, I was intensely aware of the intricate nature of the connection between my private past and my effort to make sense of the public history of the Book-of-the-Month Club. The specific itinerary of that private past, I think, has ensured that this book about the Book-of-the-Month Club is the work of an ambivalent narrator. That ambivalence is born of the fact that the "I" I feel myself to be is, more accurately, a divided subject. Sometimes I can view the operations of the club and the tastes of the middlebrow critically, from the outside and at a distance. At other times I see them from the point of view of someone who once understood them as a participant. What results is an account that oscillates continually between critique and appreciation.

What the reader will find here is an inquiry into the nature of middlebrow taste that attempts to give middlebrow culture its due. In trying to establish it as something other than a watered-down version of a more authentic high culture, I have tried to present the middlebrow positively as a culture with its own particular substance and intellectual coherence. I have thus tried to take seriously the Book-of-the-Month Club's middlebrow critique of narrow academicism and professional elitism and to understand why that critique proved generative enough in the 1920s to found a new constellation of tastes, preferences, and desires. I have also tried to provide an account of the pleasures of a characteristically middlebrow way of reading. Finally, I have tried to delineate the promises hidden within middlebrow books and to understand the context within which those promises appeared irresistible.

The reader will find, however, that this more positive view and the approving voice within which it is couched do not always dominate here. Rather, they are shadowed throughout by a different, sometimes hectoring voice, the voice of someone who is critical, finally, of some of the founding assumptions and claims of middlebrow culture. What I am after in this context is the particular ways in which middlebrow culture managed and controlled those it addressed so successfully. I try to explain just what middlebrow culture taught us to think, to desire, and to do. For it seems clear to me that middlebrow organizations such as the Book-of-the-Month Club helped acclimate us to the business of consumer culture and ushered us into a particular life world still too complacent about certain social hierarchies. Middlebrow books may have endowed us with an ample

and refined vocabulary for articulating and achieving affective states, but too often the solution they ventured with respect to serious social problems involved the moral, ethical, and spiritual rehabilitation of the individual subject alone.

But to write of these perspectives as if they give rise to two clearly defined projects is to imply that I have more control over these voices than I have. It also suggests that I have managed to develop a third perspective that can adjudicate between them in balanced, equitable fashion. In fact, neither is true. My ambivalence is persistent and real. The effect of the resulting dual perspective is more like that produced by newly acquired bifocals that render the world in fractured form across a disjunctive, arbitrary line. Just when you feel you have things in focus, a swift tilt of the head or an inadvertent dip in the gaze alters your perspective and places the world at a different, disorienting distance. That happens often here as these points of view jostle for attention, interrupt each other, and counsel caution about the confident assertions of the other. Although I make some effort to signal to the reader when major adjustments to the lens of vision have been made, I also want to acknowledge that the shifting focus is not something I have been able to control fully.

The tension in my treatment of middlebrow culture is further complicated by my efforts to capture something else about reading that my experiences at the Book-of-the-Month Club taught me to recognize and to appreciate. There are moments for me now when books become something other than mere objects, when they transport me elsewhere, to a trancelike state I find difficult to describe. On these occasions reading, or what Marcel Proust has called "that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude," manages to override my rational, trained approach to books as crafted objects.<sup>5</sup> When this occurs, the book, the text, and even my reading self dissolve in a peculiar act of transubstantiation whereby "I" become something other than what I have been and inhabit thoughts other than those I have been able to conceive before. This tactile, sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book is what those reading memories summoned for me—in the manner of Proust's madeleine—an experience that for all its ethereality clearly is extraordinarily physical as well.

Critical, analytical languages fail to do justice to the extreme specificity and idiosyncratic character of this experience, which I have heard the novelist Reynolds Price describe as a state of "narrative hypnosis," a phrase that underscores the deep involvement of the body in the act of reading. No matter the number of explanations I can generate linking the reading

choices and preferences of the Book-of-the-Month Club editors to their class position, to their professional training, or to the determining nature of earlier historical events, there remains something in their sentient, affective responsiveness to particular books that always manages to escape the categorizing imperative to fix, to pin down, and to control. Like a lepidopterist who misses the beauty and magic of lirting, living flight in the appreciative act of preserving a remarkable example of the species, in my effort to explain the preferences of the Book-of-the-Month Club editors as a function of cultural events and ideological assumptions I have no doubt failed to capture completely the distinct resonance of the particular desires and fears endured with and *through* the body that have wedded individual readers to their most treasured books.

Still, I have tried to remember that just as the editors I encountered in 1985 read amidst the overwhelming and contradictory welter of detail in impossibly complex and embodied social lives, so too did the club's founder, Harry Scherman, and his early colleagues, judges Henry Seidel Canby and Dorothy Canfield Fisher. They encountered the books they eventually chose for the membership in the context of particular friendships, the birth and death of children, funerals, marriages, publishing feuds, and so on. The materials they selected to create what later became known as middlebrow culture were chosen not only because they were members of a new professional, literary elite addressing the needs and worries of a new class, but also because those books addressed them in highly concrete, deeply resonant ways as persons moving through life in embodied form, that is, as bodies crisscrossed by innumerable, minute stigmata, some highly visible and therefore traceable to past events and earlier conditions, others invisible and undetectable with the clumsy tools of perception and interpretation we have available to us.



I have divided the narrative of my encounter with the Book-of-the-Month Club into three separate parts. Each is told somewhat differently. Part I, "In the Service of the General Reader," is presented as an ethnographic account of the editorial practices employed by the in-house editors at the club during the years 1985 to 1988. It is also narrated autobiographically and chronologically as a story about my interactions with those editors. Because this project became as much my story as it was theirs, I place myself within the tale as a character inhabiting the same world occupied by the people and institutions I was trying to understand. What I try to provide in this section is a sense of the process through which I came to

recognize that the impingement of my own history on my present activity had everything to do with what I saw and <sup>confusing</sup> could begin to say about it.

The reader will find that the process was <sup>confusing</sup> unsettling. It was so unsettling that it prompted me to question my ability to keep on doing what I was doing without first understanding not only more about my own past but also more about the past of the Book-of-the-Month Club. I broke off the ethnography when I felt the need to search for some of the causes that might help to explain the intensity of my emotional and intellectual collision with the club and the middlebrow culture it championed so consistently.

Part II, "On the History of the Middlebrow," situates the Book-of-the-Month Club historically by positioning it as a characteristically modern cultural institution. I argue that as a highly specific response to massive economic and social change, the club was intricately bound up with the refashioning of forms of work in the United States and with the reorganization of class in a consumer society. I also suggest that middlebrow culture and the particular configuration of taste it cultivated developed as a kind of social pedagogy for a growing class fraction of professionals, managers, and information and culture workers as well as for those who aspired to the status of this class, to its work routines, and to its privileges. I argue that even as the club taught its subscribers how to desire a world in which technical, specialized knowledge would reign supreme, it also implicitly attempted to counter some of the social costs and individual losses that would obtain in such a universe. Middlebrow culture was riven internally by certain key tensions, and it therefore addressed in contradictory ways the readers who found it so engaging.

The history I develop here also implicitly attempts to account for the ambivalence I brought to all my interactions with the Book-of-the-Month Club, whether in person or through the mediation of historical documents. My account alludes frequently to the ways in which middlebrow culture constituted itself implicitly, and sometimes quite explicitly, in opposition to both emerging literary modernism and the avant-garde and to the growth of an institutionalized, more thoroughly professionalized group of literary specialists, some employed by highbrow magazines, others in the fast-developing university English departments. I look carefully at the nature of the criticism leveled at the club and discuss why it originated among certain salariated literary reviewers who were deeply troubled by the intensifying effect of marketplace concerns on literary production. I suggest that the debate over the book clubs was an internal dispute among competing literary professionals about how much au-

tonomy the literary field could manage and ought properly to maintain in a thoroughly commercialized and commodified society. Finally, I try to suggest that my own personal ambivalence about the Book-of-the-Month Club is the understandable result of the way I was caught up in these public historical debates. I have narrated this account in the conventional, third-person voice of narrative history as a way of placing my reactions at a distance and in an attempt to see them as a consequence of powerful forces that controlled me as much as I was able to control them.

Part III, "Books for Professionals," returns to the autobiographical mode and attempts to make more explicit the connections between the public history of the Book-of-the-Month Club and my more intimate past with it as a reader of its selections. I offer a reading of certain selected books that I devoured appreciatively as a young adolescent, books that had been chosen and sent out by the Book-of-the-Month Club between 1950 and 1963. Through them I try to provide a description of what might be called the content of middlebrow culture in the 1950s and 1960s, which is to say, the collection of beliefs, investments, and hopes the club attempted to communicate to its readers. I try to recall what those books looked and felt like, what they sounded and smelled like, and what they enabled me to think and to dream. I try to capture the shape of the future those books painstakingly carved out in the unknown that lay before me as a young, white, middle-class girl in 1963 and 1964. I have done this for two reasons.

Very little information survives about the historical subscribers to the club. Even though certain demographic statistics can be compiled, it is almost impossible to say for sure what those subscribers made of the intensely conflicted and contradictory middlebrow books they purchased from the club. Consequently, it is equally difficult to specify what the final effects of middlebrow reading might have been for those who made it a major part of their daily lives. I offer my own experience as a way to broach the question of what a reader could have taken from middlebrow culture at a particular historical moment. My own past allows me to ask what such a reader could have used her middlebrow books to do.

I draw on three genres—autobiography, literary criticism, and ideology critique—in my effort to capture the texture and tone of one reader's way of reading with the Book-of-the-Month Club. The book discussions I provide in this section are hybrid in form, at once uniting memorial knowledge of my own past readings, critical analysis of the aspects of those books that prompted those readings, and an assessment of how they might have produced the experiences they did. I have also included within each of those readings an account of certain features in those texts, invisible to

me then, but which cry out now for analysis and commentary. It may have been those features, I suggest, that exerted the most powerful because unconscious effect on me. They may have acclimated me (and others) to certain deeply embedded assumptions about the nature of subjectivity, the shape of the social, and the appropriate forms for desire. What I am after, finally, is the character of the sentimental education offered by the Book-of-the-Month Club in the form of the middlebrow books it selected and recommended to readers like me.<sup>6</sup>

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