

Beyond The Book – the rise of the citizen reader

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What's behind the popularity of Richard & Judy's Book Club? At a time when e-readers, smartphones and tablets have made online literature ultra accessible, sharing opinions about books, and having face-to-face encounters with fellow book lovers remain more important than ever to readers, according to brand new research from the University of Birmingham.

A ten-year study of the 'meaning of reading' - carried out in the UK, Canada and the United States - investigated the popularity of so-called mass reading events (MREs) such as Richard & Judy's televised Book Club, and community reading initiatives that encourage the citizens of a city or region to 'get on the same page' through a series of activities inspired by a specially selected book.

Its results reveal that not just reading but sharing books remains a significant activity for many people in the digital age. Indeed, libraries, city governments, arts organizations, the mass media and other agencies have invested much time and effort in promoting large-scale reading events during the past decade, say the authors of *Reading beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, by Danielle Fuller, of the University of Birmingham, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, of Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada.

The study involved 11 cities in Canada, the UK and the US. The researchers talked at length to more than 70 event organisers and more than 250 readers, and took part in scores of activities, from book discussions to bus trips, and collected responses from a further 3,060 readers via an online questionnaire.

Their newly-published book explores the complex ideological investments made by readers, cultural workers, government agencies and the mass media in the meaning of reading at the turn of the twenty-first century.

'In around 2002, from our homes on either side of the Atlantic ocean, we began to observe the rapid growth in popularity of what we have come to call 'mass reading events' (or MREs),' explains Dr Fuller.

'Many such events took the idea of a book club and 'super-sized' it, so that it would operate at the scale of a town, region or nation. Some events such as 'One Book, One Chicago' and 'Liverpool Reads' employed mass media (newspapers, radio, television, the internet) in order to promote participation in the various activities that formed their local programming, whilst others (like 'Richard & Judy's Book Club') used a broadcast medium as their primary means of reaching readers.'

The fun of sharing reading with strangers and the opportunity to explore ideas in public are among the pleasures that participants derive from these MREs, she says.

'The promise of belonging to some kind of community – however briefly – is an especially powerful attraction for many readers.'

* *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*

New York: Routledge, 2013

Notes to editors

• Dr Danielle Fuller's talk *Citizen Reader* will take place at the Hay Book Festival on Saturday June 1 at 9am.

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