

#reader-core: Aesthetics and Algorithmic Capitalism



Two centuries ago, to be considered part of the literati, you had to demonstrate your chops. In *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen, 1994), during Marianne's fateful, formal audience with Willoughby, original "ckboy of Regency lit, her first order of business is to question him on the subject of books" (Austen, 1994). Naturally, they fall in love, not just because they were both hot, but because their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each (Austen, 1994). Marianne and Willoughby achieve mutual recognition, attraction, and self-actualization as two readers, two hearts aligned.

Since Jane Austen's publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in the 19th century, we've moved on from empire waist gowns, empire itself, and of course, industrial capitalism. And with these social, political, and economic changes, modes and practices of readership have also evolved in tandem with our contemporary platformed based economy. Reading itself has been transformed by these structural economic conditions. We are now reading within the landscape of surveillance capitalism, or as Susanna Sacks and Sarah Brouillette have phrased it, reading with, aside, and against algorithms (2023), a dynamic visibly captured via the rise of the reader-aesthetic.

Literary critic Mathew Kilbane has suggested that literary criticism in the platform age must consider

critically these “aesthetic forms” of reading presented on social media platforms as revealing both lifestyle practices and modes of consumption (Sacks & Brouillette, 2023). Thus, in this essay I consider the articulation of the reader-aesthetic in relation to two platforms, TikTok and Goodreads, reflecting on how the identity of being a reader and the act of reading itself has transformed from one of shared sociality, as in Marianne and Willoughby’s case, into one dominated by practices of alienating consumption.

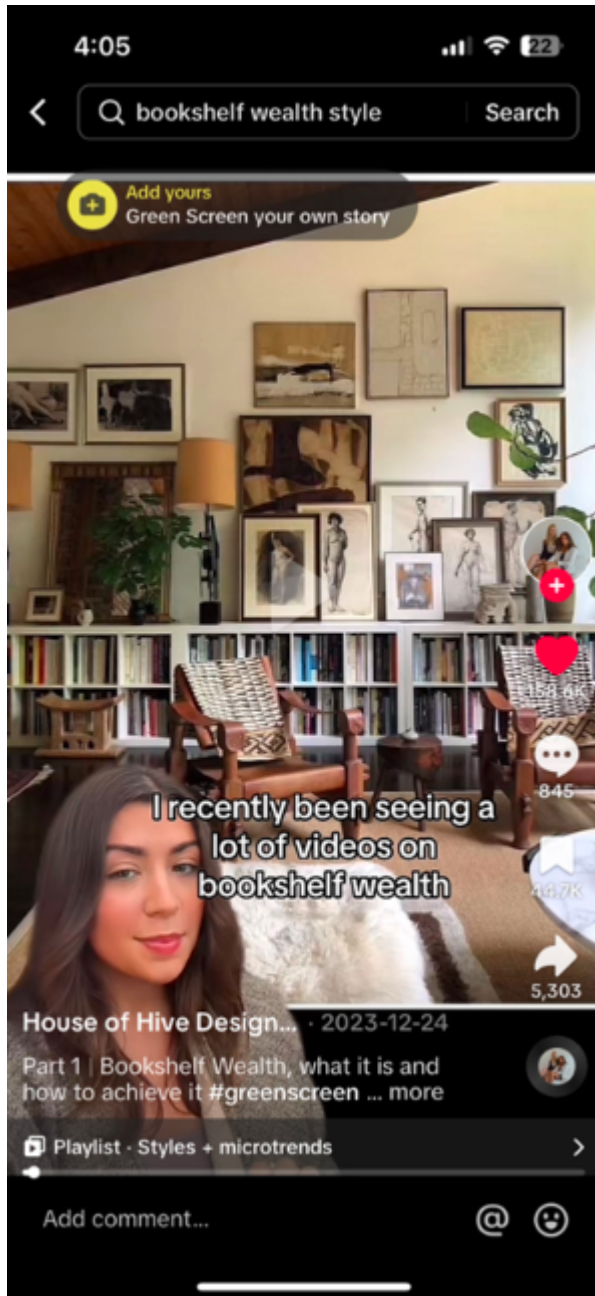


Figure 1. Bookshelf Wealth

Perhaps, like me, you have a very high screen-time metric, so you are well versed in what appears to be an ever-proliferating spate of micro-aesthetic trends. Micro-aesthetic trends, affixing labels to the suffixes -girl or -core, for example, offer what Camille Sojit Pejcha calls “algorithmically-optimized ways to participate in mainstream culture” through processes of “communal bonding” (2023),

but most often occur through consumption. And while less hyper-specific than hard-boiled egg girl (yes, this is real), the reader-aesthetic, with a myriad of subgenres like dark academia or sad girl lit (Herrington, 2022; Jamison, 2019; Stowell & Therieau, 2022), dominates social media spaces and seemingly offers a form of increasingly elusive community in our fragmented, isolating world. Today, we live in an era of extreme aestheticization facilitated by the dominance of visual technologies. But all of this isn't a newsflash exactly; sociologist Anthony Giddens theorized about these troubling possibilities decades before everyone had a ring light (1990, 1991).

Giddens, in writing about the interrelations between identity, capitalism, and modernity, cautioned against the rise of "lifestyles" whereby the consumption of products seemingly collates into the formation of a meaningful identity. Giddens argued that in modern capitalism, "the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially frame styles of life" (1991, p. 198). Practicing one of these micro-aesthetics then, like that of the reader or eclectic grandpa, appears to offer individual meaning and connection in what has become our late-stage capitalist hellscape.

While the Privacy Settings Collective has considered the way in which the subject of reader, when performed in the context of technical systems, becomes transformed into the "data subject," which is to say where reading activity, interaction, and engagement is "enumerated and monetized by default" (The Privacy Settings Collective, 2023), I am concerned here, however, not with behind-the-scenes algorithmic processes but rather the on-screen performance and presentation of the reader-aesthetic. I draw upon Jessica Pressman's *Bookishness* (2020), which reflects on the intersection of books and digital culture, to frame my investigation. Pressman, in her work, fundamentally considers how "bookishness" has been defined in ever more extreme ways by "class and consumerism" in today's digital age (2020). I ask a narrow question: how then, is the micro, or macro, trend of the reader constituted on the front-end of social media platforms in relation to these economic dynamics?

Consider TikTok. Or, specifically, BookTok, the portmanteau given to a subcommunity of creators on the app who make videos focused on reading culture. The gambit of content runs from book reviews, emotional reaction videos (lorio, 2023), book recommendations, unboxings, commentary, fan content, to seemingly uncategorizable videos Lindsay Thomas defines as centering on "the creator's identity as a reader" (2023). Think a bricolage of visuals of indie book shops, lattes, and chunky sweaters. Perhaps Pressman might tag these as #bookishness.

Of course, BookTok isn't necessarily breaking the internet here. Long before TikTok, YouTube's BookTube was a moderately successful precursor, but stagnated because of the dominance of larger, individual influencers (Perkins, 2017), and possibly, because the name BookTube is stupid. Comparatively, BookTok has fostered a larger thriving ecosystem of various niche subcommunities from romance to fantasy readers. BookTok broadly remains led by younger creators and there is a strong influence of the "wholesome" YA genre (Hynek, 2022). And within this bustling digital community, BookTok creators who review books, discuss books, and increasingly write books themselves, are becoming professionalized influencers.

BookTok as a "side" of app has been celebrated as disrupting the publishing industry in terms of highlighting historically marginalized authors, diversifying the representation of reading publics, and facilitating the expression of content often snubbed by traditional publishers such as dark romance

(Jones, 2022; Sherman, 2023; Stein, 2023). But perhaps most critically, BookTok has been recognized by publishers as influencing the sale of massive amounts of books (Harris, 2022). Simply look at the #trending table on any Barnes & Noble you might walk into.



Figure 2. *The Infamous TBR Pile*

My interest here is in TikTok's facilitation of the aestheticization of reading via its visual affordances and the formulation of the reader-aesthetic through hashtagging and algorithmic branding. If Walter Benjamin suggested that fascism tends towards the aestheticization of politics, might the grinding extraction of today's knowledge economy tend towards the aestheticization of reading (Benjamin, 1936)? I suggest this dynamic is made legible in the ever-proliferating to-be-read (TBR) stacks filled with glossy contemporary lit fic in videos, or the integration of TikTok shop in individual influencer profiles. Instead of simply listening to a video rec of a book, you can now be hypnotized to buy it directly in the app. It's no secret of course that in 2023, TikTok rolled out TikTok Shop for US consumers, thereby closing the influencing loop so to speak, facilitating seamless advertising and purchasing within the platform (Davis, 2023).

Books have historically invited curatorial collection, exhibition, and been associated with class dynamics (Feather, 1986). Marianne, suffering in genteel poverty complained to Elinor that "our own library is too well known to me, to be resorted to for any thing beyond mere amusement. But there are many works well worth reading at the Park" (1994). But like Pressman, I'm inclined to believe that our digital platformed economy has turbocharged these dynamics of possession. Perhaps Marianne should have started posting #sponcon as an escape from Barton Cottage? And its apps like TikTok which facilitate extreme consumption. Users now upload video of stacks of books on

bedside tables, even devoting entire TBR to shelves, where size, quantity, and color is key. A TBR pile in itself invites excess; it is impossible to have a "pile" composed of a single book.

But that all pales in comparison to book haul content. Book haul videos are perhaps most representative of Giddens' critique of the corrupting influence of the lifestyle trend. Haul videos originated with social media influencers filming shopping hauls of luxury goods, first popularized on YouTube on the cusp of the 2010s (Davies, 2023). Now they have been reprised on TikTok to a new Gen Z audience. As a format they have trickled down from hauls of Hermès' bags for the rich, to Target hauls for the middle-class, to hauls of disposable Shein clothing for the working-class baddies. An easily riff-able format, haul videos have spread to BookTok. While ostensibly one could read book haul videos as evidence of building up creator libraries in a curatorial sense, they are embedded within the larger objectifying forces of digital consumer capitalism.

One merely has to scroll through to see the chilling videos of creators developing wall units to display every color of a Stanley Cup to find parallels to BookTok creators panning their stacked shelves of TBR books (Kyung, 2023). Or, the BookTok influencer advice videos about how to curate bookshelves, which themselves serve as a stage for the recording of more videos, representing "book-shelf wealth" (figure 1) (Kircher, 2024), never mind if you've actually read any of them. Part of this dynamic is the result of the formalization of influencer as professional digital labor, whereby previous modes of formalized critique say, in the *LA Review of Books*, have become both democratized on social media and bound up within advertising logics.

The creators who possess the discretionary income to purchase (or be gifted) and promote these products represent the dominant mode of reader culture on TikTok. And there is a risk that this reader-aesthetic excludes readers who read differently. This is to say, who do not consume. Readers who use the public library to check out books or use digital apps like Libby reading on e-readers, even phones. But don't fret, even this model of sustainable digital consumption is being threatened. OverDrive, the entity that runs Libby, has been purchased by friendly venture capital firm KKR (Breeding, 2019), which has started a slow and painful process of capitalist "enshittification" of the service (Doctorow, 2023), a delightful way to describe a dynamic whereby corporations take over functioning platforms and progressively degrade services for users, sucking out every single bit of capital they can.

For readers who read slowly or who don't own their books, often there is simply nothing to show for the action of reading, it's as if you're not a reader at all. Lauren Klein and Catherine DiIgnazio, in their ground-breaking book *Data Feminism* (2020), note that today, "the most powerful form of evidence is data [and] the things that we do not or cannot collect data about are very often perceived to be things that do not exist at all" (2020). If you're not creating data about your reading, you're not a legible data subject, either by logging your reads, or even producing content on TikTok. You slip outside the boundaries of the reading public entirely, which is a serious problem. Today, we're witnessing the persistent hallowing out of library funding by local municipalities and states (Cineas, 2023), the shutting of humanities programs at a range of colleges and universities (Huiskes, 2023), and of course the extremist right-wing reactionary movement to censor books (Gilbert, 2023). Thus, there is a real threat that access to reading and the ability of identify as a reader becomes merely an elitist exercise.

We've had a front-row seat to these trends in New York City. The most unpopular mayor in the city's history (Fitzsimmons, 2023), Democrat Eric Adams, has in a flash of neoliberal austerity

politics (Harvey, 2007) slashed library funding to the bone with public libraries around the city shuttering for Sunday services (Charles, 2023). The worst impulses of capital have been coming for reading from both sides – neo-reactionaries eager to censor content and neoliberals interested in kneecapping public programs. This crisis not only affects individual readers but creates a context where reading, democratized via public institutions like libraries and even entities like the Internet Archive (although, surprise, they’re being sued by publishers HarperCollins, Wiley & Sons, and Penguin Random House (Robertson, 2023)), is now mirroring Marianne’s experience. And not everyone has a Barton Park within walking distance.

If TikTok and Eric Adams make the future of reading look rather bleak, let’s take a peek at what Amazon has done to Goodreads to feel even worse. We might vaguely recall that Amazon once started out as an e-commerce platform to sell books (Easter & Dave, 2017), but now we’re probably familiar with it as one of the most lucrative companies in the world, enriching Jeff Bezos so much that he suddenly has the confidence to wear a cowboy hat in a *Vogue* cover shoot (Solomon, 2023). Or perhaps we’re familiar with Amazon because of all that union busting we’ve seen in the news or the reports of employees dying on warehouse floors (Clark, 2022; Scheiber, 2023).

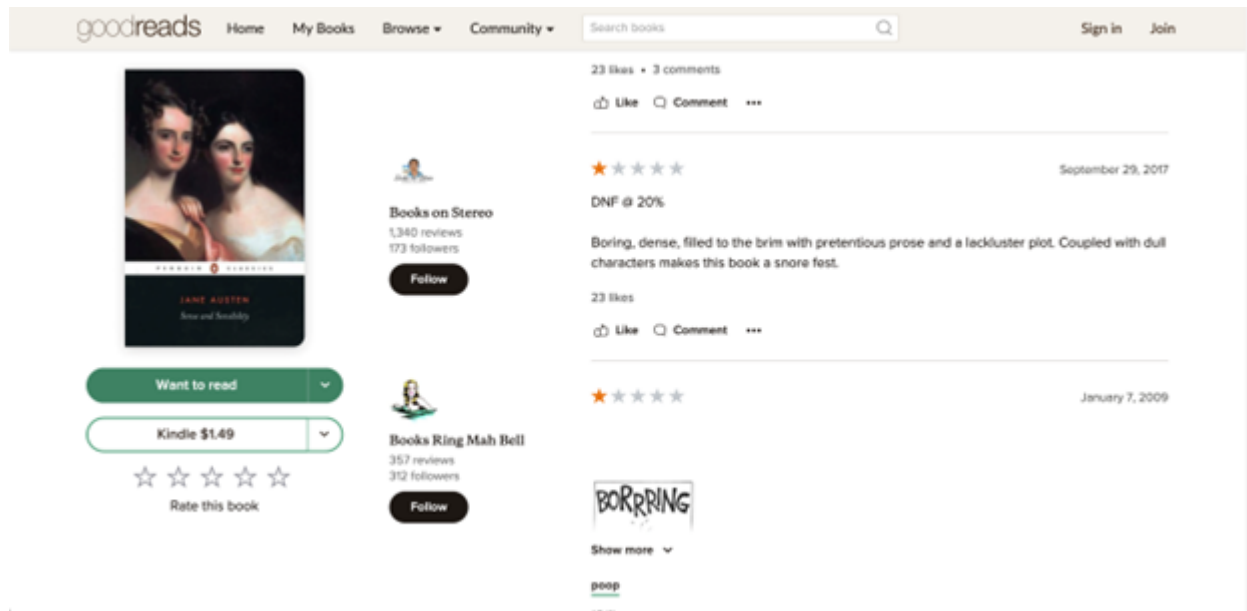


Figure 3. DNFing Sense and Sensibility

Goodreads, initially, was designed to serve as a social cataloguing platform where users tracked what they read, looked for book recommendations, and made public-facing lists. But crucially, Goodreads allowed users to write reviews. – Death of the Author (Barthes, 1977), meet Death of the Critic. Unsurprisingly, Amazon was very keen to acquire the company (O’Donovan, 2023). Much has been written about Amazon’s monopoly on the book market, as well as on how both authors and readers have maliciously manipulated the platform to engage in review bombing and harassment (Alter & Harris, 2023; Roth, 2023). And all of that is both fascinating and troubling, but what’s particularly pernicious is Goodreads’s effect on the datafication of reading.

On paper there’s nothing wrong with keeping track of what you read all month or all year, but like all digital platforms, Goodreads takes a banal social, or even private activity, and quantifies it into data – thus making it monetizable. Goodreads, in its platform formulation, encourages readers to log

books, complete with dates so they appear on a user's "Year in Reading." The Spotify's own neat datafication of user listening habits (Hoover, 2022). Goodreads even has a guide for how to boost your own reading list (Cybil, 2019). Regularly, while folks on TikTok may brag about crushing a book every week, conversely Reddit literary bros attempt to drag high-volume readers by suggesting there's some intrinsic value in reading *Infinite Jest* (1996) (CommunistBarabbas, 2023). I, like other enlightened readers, know true balance is found by demolishing Ruby Dixon's backlist of twenty-two *Ice Planet Barbarians* while simultaneously trucking through Brandon Sanderson's *The Way of Kings* (2010) for months.

Ultimately, the trend towards the quantification of reading in Goodreads' "Year in Reading" list and via the online review format on the site, which operates similarly to other product reviews on various e-commerce stores, has only made this tendency towards datafication more severe. Of course, we've been rating books long before Goodreads came around (Qasim, 2021), but the quantification of reading in a public format that also serves to datafy reader habits brings up some questions both about the commoditization of reading and the rise of the reader-aesthetic. Are you a reader if you read twenty books a year? Just five? What about one? How does this visible quantification of reading via Goodreads push us away from different modes of readership that don't neatly fit into a TikTok video or Goodreads list?

Ultimately, the rise of the reader-aesthetic presents increasingly few opportunities for reading to be a liberatory act in an era of platformed capitalism. Anthony Giddens suggested that the commodification of lifestyles was particularly insidious because it neutered the expression of a more radical "emancipatory politics," which is, fundamentally a "politics of others" (1991, p. 211). And that's a problem, particularly when literature is one of the crucial ways in which we enter into the lives of others (Keen, 2007), to engage and develop possibilities for mutual understanding, connection, and possible coalition building. Platforms like Goodreads and TikTok may offer some potentialities for us to engage in unifying forms of sociality that push against the grain of their extractive datafying fundamentals. Yet; is that enough?

Being a reader is a profoundly social act, whether you're Marianne and Willoughby having a heart-to-heart about Cowper or a contemporary Austenite complaining on X about the atrocious *Persuasion* (2022) adaptation. But reading is also a political act. Edward Said famously articulated the way in which British literature, ostensibly having little to do with the Orient per se, in fact imagined, mapped, and created conditions for imperial power that underlied the violent extraction of resources and expropriation of land. To make that argument he used Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) to illustrate these narrative dynamics (Said, 1994, p. 87). Books build our world. And if we are interested in oppositional readings, taking a page from bell hooks (2012), perhaps it is imperative that we read together, critique together, in pursuit of new worlds. But with these powerful forces of commodification and datafication of reading, alongside the disinvestment of libraries, the censorship of books, and the expropriation of data from users on Goodreads and TikTok, reading has become perhaps more aesthetic, but more alienating, boxed within the screen. In many ways our reading world is growing smaller, less expansive, and thus, the conditions for emancipatory reading ever the more narrow.

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