The virtual bookshelf: how online reading networks are reinventing social reading

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Table of contents

1. Introduction p. 5

2. Reading groups p. 13

3. Online reading networks p. 29

4. Conclusion p. 47

Appendices p. 51

Bibliography p. 57

1 Introduction

Reading groups are gatherings where readers meet at regular intervals to discuss books that they have read. Often, reading books in such a group combines reading with social gathering, leading to an enriched reading experience.

With the emergence of online networks, reading platforms have started to offer a space for readers to store, manage and share what they are reading. In this, online reading networks are innovative, but still somewhat reminiscent of the interaction that occurs at reading groups: books are still being discussed in-depth with other readers, and people make personal attachments based on mutable interests through the platform, like participants of traditional reading groups do. However, there is more freedom for the readers on online reading platforms: they can interact with people on the other side of the globe, as well as read and respond to the discussion when it is convenient to them, as there is no physical meeting of readers.

Both the reading group and the online reading network are forms of social reading. In this chapter, social reading will be expanded upon, after which the methodology of this thesis will be discussed.

This thesis will examine online reading networks through the following research questions: *How do online reading networks function in comparison to physical reading groups and what effects do their differences and similarities have on the online reading network's reading culture?*

1.1 Social Reading

In the 21st century, reading has become an indispensable part of modern society. Technological innovations in the 19th century made books and other printed texts an often used method of communication due to their new affordability. Simultaneous with these developments was a rise in compulsory education in several countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. After this, reading and writing became the first and most important skills to be taught. Today, illiterate individuals are often unable to enter numerous parts of society, because comprehension of the written word is necessary to fully function within these domains.

Reading has a significant social connotation. Before the Enlightenment, literacy skills were a marker for social distinction: only the upper social classes were able to read. In the 19th century, literacy rates began to grow as books became cheaper and

education slowly became more widespread. From this period onwards, there was no social distinction based on literacy, but on the choice of materials for reading.[1]

The image of the reader that prevails today is the solitary individual detached from the world, enjoying a book in privacy. The act of reading indeed has inherently private qualities, such as the reader isolating his or herself from outside influences while concentrating on the text. However, Elizabeth Long argues in her research on social reading that perceiving reading as completely solitary neglects crucial aspects. The first of these is the social infrastructure that is necessary in order to enable literacy and encourage the act of reading. As she states: 'reading must be taught.'[2] In countries with compulsory education all children will be immersed in reading. Learning to read is the beginning of primary education, with teachers and methods focusing on training this skill as fast as possible. Throughout the educational system, reading books remains an important part of the curriculum to help students gain reading skills and understanding of literary tradition. Without being able to read, further education is impossible: most, if not all forms of employment require the ability to read and comprehend texts. Governments depend on literate individuals to participate in society. An illiterate person will not be able to engage in a community, simply because he cannot understand the majority of the discourse.

The teaching of reading is thus socially framed, but even after formalized education to learn reading, the habit of reading itself is social. Elizabeth Long shows that readers need support from others to continue reading:[3]

> As mid-twentieth-century American empirical studies of adult reading show, social isolation depresses readership, and social involvement encourages it. Most readers need the support of talk with other readers […].

The institutional support for reading has become complex and deep, and is not only social but also commercial. This includes the way in which reading is socially framed: groups of people and institutional processes have become able to shape reading

[1] Martyn Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers', G. Cavallo and R. Chartier (ed.), *A History of Reading in the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 313-314.
[2] Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 8.
[3] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 10.

practices by acting as authorities on what texts are worth reading and how to analyze or read those texts. These authorities existed to some extent before widespread literacy, but gained momentum as a growing reading audience needed guidance on what was worthy of their time. In the 18th and 19th century, book reviews started to become a frequent appearance in newspapers and opinion magazines.[4] In the later part of the 20th century, magazines were founded with the specific goal of offering critical book reviews, with the most famous example in the United States being the *New York Review of Books*. Founded in 1963 after a dissatisfaction at current reviews, the *New York Review of Books* created a platform for critical reviews that analyzed books for both their strengths and weaknesses.[5] Readers responded wildly enthusiastic to the first edition, demanding a regular publication.[6] The magazine is still an authority on books. Similar leading review magazines are *Volkskrant Boeken* in the Netherlands and the *London Review of Books* in the United Kingdom.

While book reviews are part of the commercial business of magazine and newspaper publishing, literary criticism has become a discipline for academics to engage in. Their analyses are often based on literary theory and are published in academic journals, where fellow academics engage with their writings. Both types of book reviewing aim to help others see and understand which books are interesting and which hold little merit.

The field has significantly changed with the rise of the digital age. Starting at the end of the 20th century and continuing in the 21st century , the move to digital resources expanded reading beyond printed media; books, newspapers and magazines now began to co-exist with digital files, starting as simple documents and quickly becoming complete Internet archives and e-books. The infrastructure that had existed for a greater part of the 20th century became less formal and authoritative as a consequence: readers no longer relied solely on the traditional forms that made reading available, or on the persons of authority to find texts worth reading. The emergence of Web 2.0 has caused significant debate in academic circles on the future of the book, and the influence that

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[4] Asa Briggs & Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 163.
[5] Jason Epstein, 'A Strike and a Start: Founding the New York Review', *The New York Review of Books*, 16 March, 2013 < http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/mar/16/strike-start-founding-new-york-review/> (13 November, 2014).
[6] The New York Review of Books, 'About the Review', < http://www.nybooks.com/about/> (13 November, 2014).

digital media will have on how we read and write.[7] Amateur as well as professional book reviews have shifted to online blogs with varying popularity.[8] Sites such as *The Millions* and *Bookriot*, which function as a hub for all book-related interests, exist alongside specific book blogs which give elaborated reviews (such as *Books on the Nightstand*) and bigger sites which focus on giving readers the chance to share and read each other's reviews en masse. Examples of the latter are sites that will be investigated in this thesis, such as *Goodreads* and *Shelfari*.

Social reading has been extensively studied by different branches of research, the most prominent being Sociology and Media Studies. Barton and Hamilton examined how social reading influences small communities in their book *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. In doing so, they sought to provide a clear definition of social reading, and argued that it was, in the simplest sense, what people do with reading. This includes how people are aware of where reading is used, how social reading functions within a community and the discourses within this community, as well as how people talk about and make sense of reading.[9] Barton and Hamilton continue to express that their interest lies with all social practices in which literacy has a role, by stating that 'Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives.'[10] The focus in their definition is of all use of written language, while this thesis will focus more specifically on the social aspects of reading books, which in most investigated settings for this essay are fiction, with an occasional appearance of a non-fictional book on reading lists.

1.2 Methodology

The development and social role of online reading networks will be examined in comparison with traditional, face-to-face reading groups. While research has been done on social reading as well as reading groups, the relatively new form of social reading on online reading networks has received little attention. Online reading networks are a fast-growing phenomenon: since 2005, more than ten online reading networks have been

[7] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: University Press, 2006).
[8] Jeff Gomez, *Print is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age* (London: Macmillan, 2008), p. 58.
[9] David Barton & Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.
[10] Barton & Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community,* p. 6.

started,[11] and several more emerged in 2013 as competitors to Amazon-bought Goodreads.[12] This thesis argues that online reading networks share similarities and sometimes overlap with traditional reading groups.

Traditional reading groups, whether informal and self-sustained or hierarchically organized, often have some ambition to promote reading, mostly among the individual members. Various other organizations are concerned with the promotion of reading as well. Deborah Brandt examines these organizations in her essay 'Sponsors of Literacy' and names these literacy sponsors: 'any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy'.[13] Book reviewers, literacy scholars as well as publishers and book sellers act as literacy sponsors, for individual readers, but are also known to connect with reading groups.

Although Brandt herself focuses on how these literacy sponsors affect general reading and writing, this thesis will use the concept to examine how external organizations or institutions can influence reading groups and/or online reading networks and enhance their reading experience, following Mark Hall's use of the concept in his analysis of the Oprah Book Club.[14] Brandt focuses on the ways in which both literacy sponsor and beneficiary benefit from the sponsorship, in particular because the literacy sponsor's goals might not always be in line with the beneficiary's goals and wishes. This is largely due to the commercial factor in the broader concept of literacy learning she uses. This thesis focuses on reading groups and online reading networks. For the first, commercial factors are less influential, as reading groups are smaller and have little literary ambitions, making them less interesting for sponsors with commercial goals. Online reading networks have members with the same goals as reading groups, but it is interesting to see how literacy sponsors with commercial goals try to attract these readers regardless.

It is important to note that reading groups and online reading networks operate within a larger environment of book publishing. For discussing all groups and persons of

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[11] Daniel Nations, 'Book Social Networks: A List of Social Networks For The Booklover', *About.com*, <http://webtrends.about.com/od/socialnetworks/tp/book-social-network-list.htm> (21 October, 2014).
[12] Judith Rosen, 'Looking for the Next Goodreads', *Publishers Weekly* (2013), Vol. 260, No. 20, p. 8.
[13] Deborah Brandt, 'Sponsors of Literacy', *College Composition and Communication* (1998), Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 166.
[14] R. Mark Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', *College English* (2003), Vol. 65, No. 6., p. 648.

interest with roles, as well as their interactions, this thesis will loosely apply Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory.[15] More specifically, Ken Gelder's field of popular fiction shall be used to examine the agents in the field.[16] He recognizes the field of popular fiction to be separated from the field of literary fiction, which he describes as more 'highbrow'. The field of popular fiction discerns itself from literary fiction by being more easily associated with industry and entertainment as descriptors. The agents in the field of popular fiction have no problem with being labeled as 'commercial'.

In Bourdieu's fields, multiple agents work together to create the reading culture of popular fiction, who all have certain capital. Bourdieu uses capital to describe specific resources that specific agents have access to. He distinguishes four types of capital: economic (money and assets), social capital (relationships and networks of influence), cultural capital (knowledge, skills and education) and symbolic capital (resources available on the basis of honor or recognition).[17]

The most easily discernible agents in the field of popular fiction are the authors, who create the fiction that circulates through all other agents in the field. They wish to sell their work –to make money, but also because they believe reading is important– and have to make their work appealing to other agents in the field in order to do so. The publisher is an important agent for the author. He gives the author the means to produce his fiction, as well as promote it. The publisher makes a monetary investment in a book and wishes to see this investment pay out. In order to do this, he wants to sell as many books as possible and has to make it appeal to other agents. Apart from their monetary motivation, they too invest in reading because they believe it is important for society.

Other agents include book reviewers: their reviews can make a reader decide whether to read –or not read– a book. Their capital contains their written commentary on published books, in which they either praise a book or discourage their readers from buying or reading the reviewed book.

This thesis will examine agents that are active in the field, but are often not acknowledged by other agents as playing a significant part: they encourage reading by creating an environment for discussing opinions based on read books.

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[15] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996). Trans. Susan Emanuel.
[16] Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: the Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[17] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 241-258.

1.3 Reading group research

Reading groups have already been extensively investigated. For my analysis of reading groups, I will draw from the work of Elizabeth Long and Jenny Hartley.[18]

Long has spent ten years studying the reading groups in Houston, Texas, to find why people participate in these groups and how they benefited from membership of a reading group. She has done a qualitative study, as she found that reading groups were a widespread and grassroots phenomenon: most are so informal that there is no trace of their existence outside of the group itself.

While Long's work sets a standard for how reading groups can be studied, she has made methodological choices that diminish the overall knowledge on reading groups: she chose to concentrate on women's only reading groups, justifying that the percentage of men-only and mixed groups was much smaller and historically less significant. This decision is logical considering that Long is specifically interested in women's empowerment through the reading groups. However, the representation of men as social readers could have provided interesting information in comparison with women readers. The same can be said for her exclusion of non-white reading groups, which is due to her inability to attract African-American or Latina groups for the research, as well as the 'distorting effects' she as an interviewer tended to have as a white person, which were less significant with white reading groups.[19] The exclusion of non-white groups contributes to the reduced representation these groups have in social reading research.

Consistent with her qualitative research, Long tends to focus on specific characteristics of groups she has interviewed, wherein she is in danger of making unique characteristics seem like the standard for Houston groups. Secondly, her focus on social change set forth by women prejudices her research towards achievements by the reading groups on this topic, rather than observing the reading groups without bias.

However, Long keeps a consequent focus on her central questions: what draws women to these reading groups and what do they draw from it? Her research offers a unique dataset for exploring reading groups, from which she is able to draw important conclusions that are relevant for further research regarding reading groups. This thesis

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[18] Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Jenny Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[19] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life,* p. xiv-xv.

will focus on and apply Long's conclusions for the research on reading groups and their similarities and differences with online reading networks.

Jenny Hartley takes on a more observational role in her investigation into reading groups. She conducted a questionnaire among 350 reading groups in the United Kingdom. The answers from these groups give insight in who participate, how a reading group functions and what participants take away from it. Although Hartley's research is broad and varied, including as many views from the reading groups as possible, the research is almost completely observational. This sometimes causes her to be somewhat disconnected from other research in the field. Hartley's work is merited largely by the large set of information about reading groups, from which this thesis will draw for the analysis of reading groups.

1.4 Chapter division and scope

The following chapter will largely be devoted to reading groups, an umbrella term defining all groups of participants who come together on a regular interval to discuss read books, of which subcategories will be discussed. This definition is preferred above other known terms such as 'book clubs', since it avoids any connotations and because the term can also be applied to groups on online reading networks.

The third chapter will examine these online reading networks closely. Falling under this term will be Internet services whose primary goal it is to facilitate readers in their reading experience.

This thesis aims to make a first stock taking of online reading networks and how they function. As little research has been done on the online reading networks, this thesis means to offer tools for further analysis. Due to its scope, it will be limited to analyzing two online reading networks, which have a similar mode of operation. Furthermore, this thesis will give an overview of online reading networks' functionality and behavior on the networks by observation. With an exploratory nature in mind, the decision has been made to not extensively investigate user's experiences.

2 Reading groups

Reading groups are one of the most visible forms of social reading. In the following chapter, the historical origins of these groups will be discussed and their evolution over time will be examined. With a clear idea of its development in mind, the current form of the reading group can be analyzed. In order to see how online reading networks differ, the characteristics of reading groups must first be determined.

2.1 Reading groups in history

It is impossible to determine when the first reading groups began. Long states that 'since medieval times […] reading has drawn people together in groups that meet to talk about books.'[20] The difficulty in determining reading group behavior is that it was –and still is– a grassroots phenomenon: the small scale of the groups as well as the informal setting make it hard for historians to reconstruct their existence. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to make profound statements about people meeting in groups to discuss books in medieval times.[21]

The earliest widely studied example of reading groups was during the French salon movement. In the 18th century, intellectuals gathered in groups in salons. These salons existed before this period, but the Enlightenment set a different standard: it was here that men could gather as equals, and the salons provided 'a social space that valued ideas and fostered discussion of them.'[22] Dena Goodman discusses why these salon meetings were so unlike their predecessors, which certainly existed: the philosophers frequenting these meetings considered them the breeding ground of a new society. They did not consider the meetings as a way to pass the time, but viewed it as serious working experience to change society for the better.

An important aspect of these salon groups was the fact that they broke with the notion of reading as 'elitist' as it had been defined by the aristocracy. As Goodman says:[23]

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[20] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 31.
[21] Nevertheless, Long and Hartley take it for a fact that such groups did operate. Neither give much in-depth information about the history of reading groups, simply stating that reading groups have existed as long as reading itself.
[22] Dena Goodman, 'The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions', *Eighteenth Century Studies* (1989), Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 337.
[23] Goodman, 'The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions', p. 338.

> The kind of conversation fostered in the salons depended upon a recognized equality among the speakers which allowed for the very activity of criticism and judgment that characterized their speech.

Of course, this did not eliminate elitism and social prejudice, especially since all participants in salons had to be able to read to participate; some works were read aloud, but the Republic of Letters relied on the written word so much that illiterates could not participate.

The division between those that were able to read and those that were not had been an important one for the growing bourgeoisie in other countries besides France. When knowledge became more and more important, the number of people who were able to read grew steadily. Reinhard Wittmann describes this when determining whether or not there was a 'reading revolution' at the end of the 18th century. He finds that there was undoubtedly a 'dramatic *relative* increase in the number of readers'.[24] He estimates that between 0.1 per cent and a little over 1 per cent of the total population were readers: no reading mania in numbers, but he emphasizes that this relatively small group of new readers set in motion some momentous cultural and political events. His estimates may be on the safe side, as Rietje van Vliet gives higher estimates: in German-speaking Central Europe, literacy was up to 15 per cent in 1770, running up to 25 per cent in 1800. In cities like Amsterdam, percentages ran higher: 85 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women were literate.[25] However, these numbers must be seen as estimates, as they have been determined by available signatures on official acts. As van Vliet says: 'this information reveals little about the reading abilities of those concerned.'[26]

Reading societies was one of the ways in which social reading was rekindled, as the reading revolution had caused a trend of individualism in reading. The new readers apparently had no desire –or access– to literary discussions, as they did not participate in any of the social reading practices of the upper class:[27]

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[24] Reinhard Wittmann, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', G. Cavallo and R. Chartier (ed.), *A History of Reading in the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 288.
[25] Rietje van Vliet, 'Print and Public in Europe 1600-1800', S. Eliot and J. Rose (ed.), *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2009), p. 251.
[26] Van Vliet, 'Print and Public in Europe 1600-1800', p. 251.
[27] Wittmann, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', p. 308.

> A particular section of the bourgeoisie of the late Enlightenment who […] deplored the anti-social practice of reading in solitude as an idle and socially harmful habit, saw in these clubs a centre for the achievement of emancipation, but also doubtless for mutual discipline and control.

According to Wittmann, reading societies were an active movement by some members of the bourgeoisie to keep reading social, as reading had been before the rise in literacy. These reading societies started as early in the 17th century as joint subscriptions to newspapers and journals. This was still a private way of reading; the newspapers and journals circulated within a group, while each member had their solitary space of reading. Slowly these societies shifted to so-called reading libraries, a more formal organization where the subscriptions were kept in a room or building. As time went by, members would meet in these places to discuss what they had read. There was need for this sort of places that allowed communication about and through reading matter, as Wittmann shows: the number of these reading societies boomed, growing in Germany from 13 known societies in 1770 to 200 reading societies twenty years later.[28]

These societies became an important place for social discourse between members: they were able to discuss what they read and form opinions on it, as well as widen their social circle. The latter became a more central goal for reading societies further in the eighteenth century. An interesting note to make is that the ideal of social equality was almost non-existent in these societies:[29]

> Although there was mostly no reference in the statutes of these reading societies to class restrictions, […] social homogeneity was guaranteed by the fact that a majority decision was needed before a new member could be accepted.

While Wittmann focuses mainly on the German reading societies, similar societies were founded all over the European continent, in England as well as less densely populated countries such as Norway. Eide, who investigated Norwegian reading societies in the

[28] Wittmann, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', p. 309.
[29] Wittmann, 'Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?', p. 309.

19th century, stated that 'the difference between a Norwegian club and one in England or on the Continent would have been negligible.'[30]

These groups were tremendously important in forming the identity of the new reading public. The reading societies were formed with different goals: some consisted of members from a new social class that wanted to educate themselves, while others were parish-organized reading societies that meant to encourage religious reading. Regardless of these goals, all these reading societies 'acquired books both for information, pleasure and instruction.'[31]

Alongside these reading societies a movement towards more expansive literary societies started emerging in the United Kingdom: larger organizations which often focused on the published works of one author, one example being the Shelley Society.[32] These societies, though often stigmatized and ridiculed by the media and the scholarly world, allowed members –and to a great extent, non-members as well– to learn about literature, as well as share their enthusiasm. They attempted to 'combine a popular and an academic approach to literary work.'[33]

These literary societies do not resemble current-day reading groups as much as reading societies do, due to their focus on organized lectures and publications such as journals. What makes them interesting however, is their welcoming character to all who wished to share their reading pleasure and thus were more inviting to any reader. As mentioned earlier, reading societies did not integrate different social classes, but literary societies welcomed anyone who 'could afford the shilling dues.'[34]

From the 19th century onwards, reading groups were on the rise. Long, focusing on American reading groups for women, describes the close alliance between reading groups and initiatives for social change that seem to echo the same ideals that the French salon movement had. Drawing on the European history, she shows how American reading groups stayed close to their predecessors as they '[…]offered forums for critical reflection that were crucial for helping people define the moral and

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[30] Elisabeth S. Eide, 'Reading Societies and Lending Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Norway', *Library & Information History* (2010), Vol. 26, No. 2, p. 125.
[31] Eide, 'Reading Societies and Lending Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Norway', p. 125.
[32] Angela Dunstan, 'The Shelley Society, Literary Lectures, and the Global Circulation of English Literature and Scholarly Practice', *Modern Language Quarterly* (2014), Vol. 75, No. 2, p.285.
[33] Miriam Bailin, 'A Community of Interest –Victorian Scholars and Literary Societies', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* (2009), Vol. 55, n. pag. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/039558ar>(5 August, 2014).
[34] Bailin, 'A Community of Interest –Victorian Scholars and Literary Societies', n. pag.

ideological dimensions of their social identity.'[35] Describing the book movement in America as inherently linked to social reform, Long shows how cultural reform brought literary groups in a higher social standing, allowing women to educate themselves more.

Reading groups have thus evolved from the French salons as a desire to form members in moral and social dimensions through reading and discussions. As literacy numbers rose, reading for pleasure and learning also became important reasons for reading groups. With this in mind, current reading groups can be examined in the context of their predecessors, to see if and how motivations and goals have shifted and how reading groups function differently now.

2.2 What is a reading group?

As mentioned before, even though the reading group is a visible and well-known phenomenon, it is also a statistically indefinable one, considering that it's 'any group which wants to call itself one.'[36] However, when considering the history of reading in groups, and the extensive research that has already been done, it is possible to give a general idea of what reading groups are, which variations exist, and how members benefit from participating.

Hartley is very clear in her definition of reading groups: '[….] a group of people who meet on a regular basis to discuss books.'[37] And indeed, since there is no formal set of rules as to what reading groups are or should be, they vary enormously in organization, size and membership. The organization structure is often significant in how many members reading groups have. A rough division can be made between macro reading groups, which are founded on an organization's initiative, and micro reading groups, which are started by reading enthusiasts amongst themselves. Both groups have a completely different structure and operate with different goals and distinct properties. It is important to note these differences and properties in order to see how online reading networks relate to reading groups, and whether or not they show a stronger similarity to a specific type of reading group.

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[35] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 34.
[36] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 2.
[37] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 2.

2.2.1 Macro reading groups: Oprah's book club

In 1996, reading groups made a comeback in America when Oprah Winfrey announced that she would start a Book Club as a part of her regular Oprah Winfrey show. The talk-show host chose a book each month, and after six weeks one half of her show would be devoted to the discussion of the book. This discussion would be staged with the author of the book, Oprah herself, and a few carefully chosen viewers. The setting would always invoke a sense of comfort: sometimes over dinner, in Oprah's home library, with a few segments even showcasing as a 'sleepover' in the author's home.[38]

Oprah stated when she started the Book Club that she wanted to 'get the country reading',[39] and it would seem that she achieved her goal. As Richard Lacayo put it in an article discussing Oprah: 'Oprah selects a title for the book-discussion club [. .]. Then everyone in America buys it.'[40] Creating 28 bestsellers in a row, Oprah ensured that any book picked for Oprah's Book Club would sell close to a million copies more than it did before. Her first pick, *The Deep End of the Ocean* by Jacquelyn Mitchard went from 100,000 to 915,000 copies followed up by Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* which saw a growth from 300,000 copies in print to 1,390,000.[41]

While the sales statistics are impressive, the number of people that Oprah has managed to get reading again is even more so. The show has 500,000 viewers reading the book before a segment appears, while it receives 10,000 letters each month from people eager to participate in the Book Club.[42] These are not people who are reading regardless of Oprah: many of them confess that they only started reading because Oprah encouraged them to do so.[43]

> Some of the people […] "hadn't read a book since high school, and because Oprah Winfrey was so powerful and so respected by them, they took her word for it, they read it, and they were blown away by the idea that a so-called serious book could be as much fun to read as a mystery or a romance."

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[38] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 653.
[39] D. T. Max, 'She has created 28 bestsellers in a row', *Guardian*, 4 January 2000, p. 2.
[40] Richard Lacoya, 'Whatever Happened to Last Year's Most Influential People?', *Time*, 21 April 1997, p. 70.
[41] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 647.
[42] Max, 'She has created 28 bestsellers in a row', p. 2.
[43] Kathleen Rooney, *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005), p. 14-15.

Oprah's success has been widely reviewed in newspapers and magazines, but only in recent years have academics deemed the Book Club worthy of analysis. This reluctance of academics to engage with Oprah's Book Club is often seen as disdain for what they deem 'low culture' books proliferating. They don't want to read the selected books because of its 'lowbrow talk show seal of approval.'[44] However, a new set of academics see Oprah's Book Club as an interesting social phenomenon on how Oprah successfully influenced the literary field. Kathleen Rooney, in her research on the Book Club's functioning in the first six years of its existence, argues that Oprah as a new literary force changed the power relations and positions within the field –explaining much of the reluctance of traditional literary powers to accept her as an authority.[45] While most literary critics dismissed Oprah's Book Club as a place for popular fiction, the books that Oprah selected are not easily classified: most of the selections were critically acclaimed by many reviewers before being picked for Oprah's Book Club.[46] By making books that were typically seen as more 'highbrow' into bestsellers, Oprah seemed to challenge the idea that critically acclaimed books could not be commercial successes as well.

Regardless, traditional reviewers responded with cynicism to the success sales of the books selected for the Book Club, and several authors were disdainful about being selected: they came to regret being associated with Oprah's Book Club.[47] But Oprah had no particular wish to be associated with the literary field either. The goal of Oprah's Book Club was not intellectual: the discussions have a personal character, discussing emotional responses to read books rather than content analysis of the books.[48] Hall also remarks the way in which Book Club readers focus on the emotional, and not academic reading, even outside of the show's airtime:[49]

> As posts to the book club Web site show, "Oprah's Book Club" attracted a large number of readers, some well-educated, who do not regularly read fiction on their own and are not motivated by the desire for the rewards of academic literacy, including economic and social mobility, critical thinking, and access to information.

[44] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 664.
[45] Rooney, *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America*, p. 8.
[46] Rooney, *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America*, p. 10-11.
[47] See Rooney, *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America*, p. 33-66.
[48] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 658.
[49] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 648.

In his essay on Oprah's influence on literacy, Hall argues that Oprah's Book Club gives an interesting insight on how literacy sponsors can positively influence reading habits. The fact that Oprah inspired non-readers to pick up a book, shows how she is seen as a trusted friend in an intimacy that has carefully been constructed by the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in general, causing viewers to trust Oprah as an authority in making the right choice. Hall argues that Oprah is a literacy sponsor, promoting reading under her show's watchers. She sponsors the participants of the Book Club by giving direction in what to read and by presenting the discussion of the book on the show, she helps the participants gain understanding of the book's interesting topics. Watchers of the show trust Oprah's judgment based on her person, or rather, the self that she projects through the show. This is important, because the personality that Oprah Winfrey constructs determines whether or not participants relate to her, and, therefore, trust her judgment.[50]

It is difficult to gauge the effect the Book Club has on its members, seeing as most of them are passive. Some members write actively, in letters or on the website, participate as audience in the show or get invited as a part of the discussion group for a specific book, but the majority of the Book Club participants only read the book and watch the show. Thompson explains that this is a usual and expected form of interaction, as he describes the relationship between TV personalities and the show's recipients in his work *The Media and Modernity*. The interaction between Oprah and the Book Club readers is quasi-mediated, meaning that while the producer engages in communication with the recipient, the recipient has no means to respond. Thompson writes:[51]

> For recipients, the producers are personalities with whom they can sympathize or empathize, whom they can like or dislike, detest or revere; but the traits of these personalities cannot normally be refined or controverted by the kind of dialogical interaction characteristic of face-to-face interaction.

The form of interaction in which Oprah's Book Club engages, is the main cause for the lack of qualitative data on participants' experiences. The samples of participants telling

[50] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 649-650.
[51] John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 99.

how much the show has helped them are supported by the sales' numbers and show ratings.

While Oprah's Book Club has no equal in size, other large book clubs have been started in different countries as well. Hartley mentions the Radio 4 Bookclub in the United Kingdom, a radio program wherein books are discussed in much the same way: the author attends, and the host facilitates discussion between the author and an audience of twenty-five, which are often members from reading groups around the country. With half a million listeners it faces the same challenge as Oprah's Book Club did: to keep the intimate association with reading in groups while not being able to connect directly to the listeners.[52]

But commercial media are not the only organizations initiating reading groups. Between the monstrously sized groups such as Oprah's and the neighborhood groups discussed below, are reading groups started by organizations such as public libraries, book shops, magazines and publishers. Hartley describes these groups to great extent: book shops such as Barnes & Noble take care to create a friendly environment where the group can meet and discuss the books, as well as borrowing the books to members who are unable to pay for them.[53] Public libraries instigate these groups as well, to promote reading and create enthusiastic reading societies.

An important distinction between these formally organized reading groups and the informal neighborhood reading groups is that in the former there is often a leader in the reading group. This can be the coordinator from the book shop, or a librarian from the public libraries. These leaders are often the backbone of the reading group; participants might be less passionate about attendance or discussion, and without the leader there would be less driving force behind the reading group.

Like Oprah, these leaders –and the organizations that back them– could be described as literary sponsors: reading group initiatives started by organizations often have the ambition to explicitly promote reading, they act as authority on what is good reading and how they should discuss this. These programs aim to draw in people who would otherwise not read, and thus promote reading.

[52] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book,* p. 5.
[53] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, pp. 6-11.

2.2.2 Micro reading group: home and neighborhood

The most prolific of reading groups are the small groups, that Hartley names 'neighbo[u]rhood groups'.[54] These reading groups often operate within a set number of participants who are either neighbors, friends, family or live within a reasonable distance from each other. Meetings are typically conducted in a member's home, which is significant in how the reading group experience manifests itself. The atmosphere of a safe home environment contributes to the open discussion and interaction of the members. The atmosphere of familiarity is also present in the enjoyment of refreshments, for which some groups pay a monthly contribution, while others work in a rotation.

The meeting at home prevents the reading group from growing too large. The groups rarely consist of more than twenty to twenty-five members, with a majority having between seven to ten.

Reading groups form largely through word-of-mouth; friends, neighbors or family form an important starting point, often inviting other interested parties as well. Long even states that all 'groups grow out of existing social or institutional networks'.[55] These networks range from the friends mentioned above, to work environments, groups who have attended a class together and continued after the class ended, yet Hartley also mentions groups that start out from aerobics teams or choirs.[56] In the latter category, all members tend to know each other to some degree, but the former type of reading groups form through word of mouth; three friends start the initiative of a reading group and each of them invites two others, resulting in a group of relative strangers to each other. Advertisements in papers for reading groups are not uncommon in rural areas; here too, the members do not know each other.

Reading groups include more women than men: Hartley reports that 69% of researched groups were women, with a 4% being all-men. Long purposefully focuses on women's reading groups, stating that 'over half the groups in Houston were women's groups, and only a very small percentage were for men only.'[57] The oldest groups tend to be for men, and they hold very formal traditions, the earliest of these groups having started in the 18th century. The dominance of all-women groups is more often than not a

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[54] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 14.
[55] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 91.
[56] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 39.
[57] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. *xiv*.

deliberate choice: Hartley has groups describing that adding a man to the mix changed discussion. In a study conducted in Melbourne, Australia, Marilyn Poole specifically investigated if these all-women groups kept men out due to feminist convictions. However, this idea was dismissed by all groups, giving other reasons for the exclusion when this was a conscious decision.[58]

Both Hartley and Long report that the average reading group member has enjoyed a relatively high education: 88 percent of the respondents in Hartley's survey had attended college, while 94 percent of participants in Long's survey did. It should be mentioned that Long herself indicates that her survey was not indicative for Houston's reading groups, as many groups failed to answer the survey or were reluctant. Her exclusion of non-white reading groups might also influence her results.

Structures and organization differ per reading group, but overall it seems reading groups do not necessarily believe these two things to be very important. The only things that are determined is who is in the group, what books they will read and how often they should meet. There is no formal hierarchy, and rarely a group leader. There will be a rotation schedule in hostesses and discussions leaders, but there is no group leader that is responsible for planning next meetings or choosing the next book.

2.3 The use of the reading group

To ascertain in which ways online reading networks can be compared to reading groups, it is important to find what being a part of a reading group means to its members. In this, the purpose and expectation with which reading groups are started are significant in relation to the benefits the members have from it.

As noted above, a significant number of reading groups form through proximity – such as living in the same neighborhood– or acquaintances. Hartley notes that reading group members are often active in other groups and societies. When asked to list these in the survey, some participants wrote down so many groups that they ran out of space on the paper to write. Hartley credits the reading group members as either enthusiastic participants, eager learners –often as students in evening classes– or having a feeling of connection to their community.[59] But Long has what may be another explanation: the members are participating in these societies for want of social interaction and

[58] Marilyn Poole, 'Between the Covers: Women's Reading Groups', J. Henderson, K. Aggerman & G. Keightley (ed.), *Sociological Sites/Sights: TASA 2000 Conference* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 2000), p. 4.
[59] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 36.

intellectual –or adult– conversation. 'These women agreed that they didn't just miss talking to other adults but felt particularly deprived of substantive intellectual conversation.'[60] This seems a motivation for a lot of participants interviewed by Long, as well as rural groups surveyed by Hartley; not just the reading of books, but intellectual processing of what is read in adult conversation. For Long, this is inherently connected to the members' perception of society and self in that society, as it has been for 19th century reading groups, while Hartley looks more at the social interaction and enjoyment factor of the reading groups and other societies.

What do reading groups talk about? Important factors seem to be the language in the book, the story and its characters. The range of opinions in a group seems vital for good discussions: some good books provided less successful nights due to everyone agreeing.[61] Discussion is enriched by the group's history: members can make comparisons between a current book and books that have been read in the past. This, as well as research or 'preparation' by a discussion leader, are important headers for discussion; books that were found to be confusing or incomprehensive became interesting due to prepared queries or context, and other books produced disappointing evenings because there was hardly any context for its themes. Personal experiences or connections to a book are thought to be especially valuable, but for these it is vitally important that the atmosphere in the group is safe and non-judgmental. These additions to discussions often form a strong connection and feeling of friendship within reading groups. Interesting to note is that some members clearly participate in reading groups for want of 'intellectual conversation' (as mentioned above), while other reading groups wish to distance themselves from study-like reading of their books. Hartley quotes several groups mentioning that their group is 'very casual and deliberately not like school' and 'we're not very intellectual'.[62] This might be the reason that reading groups are often seen as middleclass culture. Poole describes that 'opinions on books are based on subjective criteria rather than literary criteria'.[63] For the members it is more interesting and meaningful to discuss whether they can relate to the characters than to discuss the literary aspects of the text.

[60] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 93.
[61] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 79.
[62] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 90.
[63] Poole, 'Between the Covers: Women's Reading Groups', p. 5.

All groups mention that discussions can get personal and emotional. This is one way how the members shape themselves according to these books; they use them to form an opinion on society and their place within it.[64] Even books that are not particularly high-brow or socially engaged can lead to interesting discussion on moral, cultural and social values.

Some reading groups are short-lived, but if a reading group exists longer than a year, its members tend to form a tight group of friends. This makes most look forward to their monthly meetings, although all reading groups of Hartley, Long and Poole emphasize that the book is the central focus of the discussion, with some groups taking special care to keep talk on the book with rules such as 'no chat before coffee' and 'no discussion of next month's choice before ten o'clock'.[65] This trend of emphasizing the book discussion over the social contact is an interesting trend when comparing the reading groups to reading societies of the 19th century, where the broadening of social circles and acquiring new contacts were the primary goals. The social aspect seems to flow more naturally in contemporary reading groups, while the book discussion needs to be steered actively.

Several studies have looked to the added value that reading groups have for their members. Marjolein van Herten investigated the value of reading groups with a special focus on its social merits. She found from a survey of 212 reading groups that personal connections were a very important part of belonging to a reading group, alongside personal development.[66]

2.4 Similarities and differences between macro and micro reading groups

Both macro and micro reading groups are relevant when comparing them to online reading networks. The number of members involved in online reading networks is more easily compared to macro reading groups, while the structure of these networks might be more alike to micro reading groups. Therefore, it is useful to analyze characteristic differences between the macro and micro reading groups.

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[64] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 92.
[65] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 87.
[66] Josje den Ridder, 'Praten over boeken: de sociale waarde van leesgroepen', E. van den Berg, P. van Houwelingen & J. de Hart (ed.), *Informele groepen. Verkenningen van eigentijdse bronnen van sociale cohesie* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011), pp. 116.

An important and often defining characteristic for macro reading groups is the literacy sponsor that leads the group. Oprah Winfrey leading the Oprah's Book Club is the most obvious example, but most macro reading groups have one or two hosts that lead all communication between participants and themselves. These hosts are the main motivation for most participants to read with the group, as they trust these hosts as valuable judges of good taste.

These hosts are almost non-existent in micro reading groups. While reading groups organized by a book store or a library might have a leading figure to organize the events, and most neighborhood reading groups have one member who took the initiative, there is no real sense of hierarchy in micro reading groups.

The absence of hierarchy in micro reading groups is also significant when considering the relationships formed within both types of reading groups. In micro reading groups, participants engage in face-to-face interaction, as Thompson calls it.[67] Due to meeting in person, they can much more easily influence and understand communication. This often leads to more closer and personal connections as well.

As mentioned earlier, this type of interaction is not possible with macro reading groups, like Oprah's Book Club. On the show, a select number of participants are able to directly interact with each other, Oprah and often the discussed book's author, but the majority of Oprah's Book Club participants cannot interact with Oprah. Hall puts great emphasis on the personal, intimate character of Oprah's show, wherein she shares many aspects of her own life. According to him, this is how Oprah builds trust between her and her viewers. In this way, the viewer relates to Oprah and views her as a trusted person. Hall describes it thus: [68]

> Television scholars refer to this imagined or constructed intimacy as a "para-social" relationship between a viewer and a television personality or character because although it is not actually interpersonal interaction, for many people, so the thinking goes, watching a favorite television personality functions as a replacement for actual social relationships.

[67] Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, p. 82.
[68] Hall, 'The "Oprahfication" of Literacy: Reading "Oprah's Book Club"', p. 650.

So while participants of macro reading groups have little means to interact directly with one another or the host, they build a para-social relationship with the host of the reading group. At the same time, as all participants share this para-social relationship, their mutual attachment to the reading group host leads to a link, from where they can engage in interaction among themselves –often mediated in some sense, through letters, internet or on the show itself.[69] Nevertheless, the macro reading group is a more casual group for its participants: whenever a participant does not feel like reading a book, or following the show, she can stay away, while in micro reading groups, her presence will be missed. Due to the size of micro reading groups and the face-to-face interaction, social relationships are more easily and firmly established.

While macro and micro reading groups have many differences, an aspect in which they are surprisingly similar is the non-intellectual character of the book discussions. Macro reading groups tend to focus on books which are relatable and, specifically in Oprah's Book Club's case, can be linked to their author's own experiences. Although Oprah never acknowledged the literary divide, and most choices are picked because they are thought-provoking novels, the Book Club has been dismissed by literary circles as populist reading and lowbrow.[70] Oprah's Book Club has no desire to prove itself as highbrow, and mainly focuses on the positive effect of reading.

Both Long and Hartley mentioned a similar attitude in micro reading groups, who sometimes consciously adopt a non-intellectual attitude.[71] Discussions are made interesting by the different point of views all participants bring, and to most, it is this multivocality that makes for a good discussion of a book. Long notices that a purely literary analysis can often harm a discussion due to its authoritative interpretation, but members with a talent for literary analysis can give new insights within a broader discussion.[72]

2.5 Conclusion

The reading group as it is known in the 21st century has been evolved from the formal reading societies in the 18th and 19th century. The modern reading group exists mainly in two forms: the macro and the micro reading group. The macro reading group is

[69] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 202.
[70] Rooney, *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America*, p. 46-47.
[71] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 101.
[72] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 147.

organized by one specific host or organization and often wishes to promote reading, functioning as a literacy sponsor for the participants. Micro reading groups are often started by friends or acquaintances on their own initiative. Both are significantly distant from the academic way of treating books, and adopt a more personal and emotional way of talking about books.

Reading groups can make an important contribution to the participant's sense of self. In micro reading groups, both Hall and Long have argued how participants form their identity by shared experiences and how books make sense of situations they may have encountered. For macro reading groups, the formation of self for participants is harder to determine, due to the more passive attitude of the participants. Featured participants' reactions on Oprah's Book Club often describe that the club has helped them to pick up reading and to overcome difficult moments in their life.

Literacy sponsors play a more significant role in macro reading groups than in the micro groups. Often, they are started or supported by a literacy sponsor, who wishes to promote reading with the audience the show or organization has access to. It can be difficult to encourage people to read, and the open discussion and authority of the literacy sponsor can be promoting factors in the popularity of a reading group.

Micro reading groups are founded on the enthusiasm and initiative of their members, and are thus removed from literacy sponsors. However, literacy sponsors sometimes try to make contact with micro reading groups by offering discounts on books or offering spaces to meet.

3 Online reading networks

In the previous chapter traditional reading groups were examined. From this, several characteristics of reading groups were determined: members of small reading groups often have more personal interactions, tend to have a non-intellectual attitude to their book reading experience and give participants informative insights for their sense of self.

With these characteristics in mind, the comparison can be drawn between reading groups and online reading networks. In the past years, several online reading networks have been launched and each of these attracts a particular audience. With many readers still unaware of this digital way of sharing reading, it comes as no surprise that researchers have not yet examined these networks in depth. Vlieghe and Rutten made a start in their essay 'Rhetorical Analysis of Literary Culture in Social Reading Platforms' by examining how online reading networks used their mission statements to give expression to social literacy. They found through the used terms in these statements that certain agents of what they call 'the social media field' had a strong presence on online reading networks, while others seemed absent. The focus of online reading networks in comparison to other environments of social reading is the 'interrelatedness of production, mediation and reception .'[73] They used four online reading networks in their research, only looking at the sites' mission statements.

Since this thesis will look at the online reading networks' users to determine and analyze characteristics of the online reading networks, it will be limited to analyzing two online reading networks in depth: Goodreads and Shelfari.[74] These are the most well-known online reading networks and have the largest number of users. It is important to note that both these networks are owned by Amazon, although Shelfari's connections to Amazon are more apparent as it visibly exchanges information with its mother company. Goodreads has long been an independent reading network and has thus been able to develop without the objective of selling books. However, it has been acquired by Amazon in 2013.[75] At the time of this thesis, the implications of this acquisition are yet

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[73] Joachim Vlieghe & Kris Rutten, 'Rhetorical Analysis of Literary Culture in Social Reading Platforms', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2013), Vol. 15.3, n.pag., <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2244>(23 September, 2014).

[74] Goodreads Inc., 'Goodreads', <https://www.goodreads.com/>(23 September, 2014), and Shelfari, 'Shelfari', <http://www.shelfari.com/>,(23 September, 2014).

[75] Rosen, 'Looking for the Next Goodreads', p. 7.

unclear, but it is important to keep in mind that both online reading networks are owned by the same company and thus have the same corporate goal.

3.1 What are online reading networks? How do they function?

Online reading networks are website communities centered around books and book readers. Goodreads' mission is 'to help people find and share books they love'.[76] Shelfari's mission has a similar sentiment, although the formulation gives it more highbrow aspirations: 'Our mission is to enhance the experience of reading by connecting readers in meaningful conversations about the published word.'[77] While Goodreads focuses on the books, Shelfari's mission statement focuses on the readers. This demonstrates the two main services these sites provide: cataloguing and searching books, and sharing thoughts and opinions about read books with other users.

In her essay about the network Goodreads, Nakamura set the first strides into analyzing the workings of online reading networks. She is interested how the online reading networks function to create a social community, and points to it as a more interesting research topic than the discussion on digital reading devices.[78] Nakamura compares these networks to other social media sites, like Facebook, explaining how users make profiles and how they start out using the services: 'The three bookshelves that all users start with are entitled "read," "currently- reading," and the conveniently shopping- list- like "to- read,"[…].'[79] Readers can rate a book on a scale from one to five stars and give it a review. Other users can then comment and discuss on this review.

This system is remarkably similar on other online networking sites. Profiles connecting with friends, book entries that allow rating and reviewing, and algorithms that 'help' readers find their next 'good read'. This creates an opportunity for scholars to study reading culture 'in the wild', as Nakamura says,[80] as this data allows readers to interact and search each other's reviews. Rather than browsing friends' bookshelves in their homes, one can look online. However, Nakamura is skeptical of the fact that Goodreads, like many social media, sells its users' information to give third parties information about book preferences.

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[76] Goodreads Inc., 'About Goodreads', <https://www.goodreads.com/about/us>(23 September, 2014).
[77] Shelfari, 'About', <http://www.shelfari.com/Shelfari/AboutUs.aspx>(23 September, 2014).
[78] Lisa Nakamura, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*', *PMLA* (2013), Vol. 128, No. 1, p. 238-239.
[79] Nakamura, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*', p. 240.
[80] Nakamura, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*', p. 241.

Goodreads and Shelfari both offer their users three dominant ways to explore and share books: through profile pages, individual book pages and reading groups. These three ways will be discussed for both networks, after which the online reading networks will be analyzed and compared with reading groups, as well as which effects these differences have on reading culture.

3.2.1 Profiles

An important part of Goodreads and Shelfari are the users' profile pages.[81] As Nakamura has described, the 'bookshelves' are the main part of the profile. There is some basic information about the user (which can be imported from Facebook, with which Goodreads easily connects), there are friends in an off-center sidebar –or in a different tab altogether–and the main part of a profile is taken up by book covers. The three main shelves give users the bare necessities to provide status updates of their reading progress. The first shelf, the 'read' shelf, is much like a bookcase at home. On this shelf, users can showcase which books they have read, as well as easily find their own rating and reviews about this book.

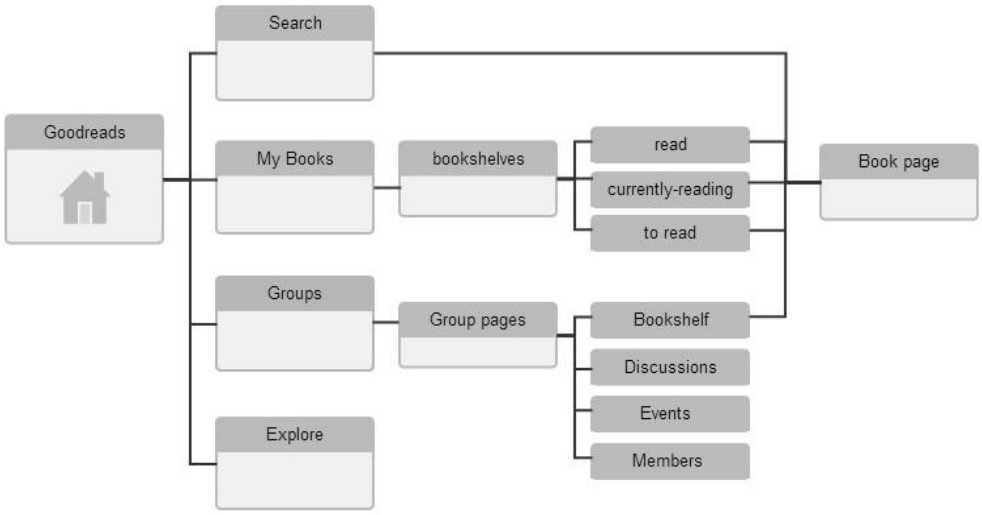

Fig. 1 A sitemap of Goodreads.com

The 'to-read' shelves are as much a personal to-do list as a display: it is a way to show interests that do not necessarily show in the 'read' shelf, as well as a place to store recommendations that users find on the site.

[81] See *Appendix 1*.

The ‘currently reading’ shelves are an opening for discussion among users: when finding that a friend is reading the same book, one can respond to this and engage in conversation about the book.

While most of the users have standard profiles which main goal is to collect books and write reviews, there are two special types of users: authors and librarians. On both Goodreads and Shelfari, authors can gain a special status by integrating their profile page with their author detail page, allowing them to provide more personal information (such as integrating their blog) and organize panels and giveaways. Only authors that

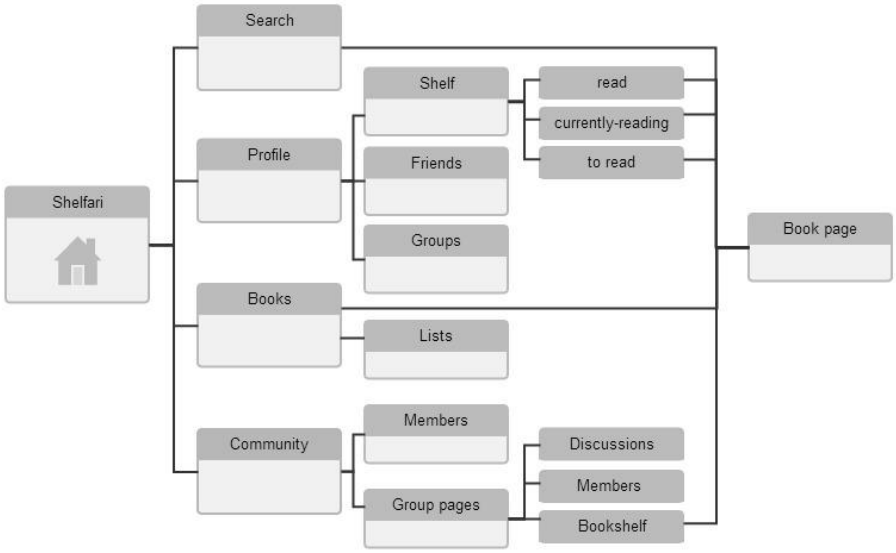

Fig. 2 A sitemap of Shelfari.com

sell their books on Amazon.com can become a registered author on Shelfari. While Goodreads’ author page becomes a hybrid between a normal profile page and author information, Shelfari’s authors merely get an avatar reading ‘Author’ to signify their status. There is a stark difference in how much the function is used: Goodreads has a significant number of best-selling contemporary authors registered, while Shelfari’s authors are relatively unknown and inactive.

Goodreads and Shelfari both work with so-called ‘librarians’ to maintain and update book data. These users edit book data to prevent double entries, misattributed authors and out-of-date book covers. Goodreads allows any user who has entered more than fifty books in his or her personal shelves to apply for librarianship, relying on the

user's personal interest to make qualitative changes.[82] Shelfari users can all edit book information, which must then be approved by librarians before being processed on the website. While making changes can give a regular user the status of 'editor', the only way to become a librarian is through appointment by the Shelfari staff.[83]

Both authors and librarians enjoy a status as significant users on online reading networks. Next to popular users –whose popularity depends on the appreciation of their reviews– they are recommended as 'people to follow'.

3.2.2 Book discussions

With the profiles as the starting point, users engage in dialogue about read books all over the site. One of the pages where this is possible is a book page. Every book that is entered into the site's database has a book cover, a short summary, information about the author and how to find the book elsewhere. Goodreads and Shelfari differ in how the book pages work.[84]

Shelfari has a broad variety of information on a book page. The page is divided into a number of subsections, which are formatted as tabs –not an uncommon sight in the online environment. The first tab users see is 'Book Extras', which provides information about the plot, characters, often liked quotes (a feature which is possible on Shelfari due to its connection to Amazon's Kindle), locations, as well as details on the publisher, author and covers. A second tab shows other users who have read the book, as well as their reviews.

It is the third tab that allows readers to interact. It is labelled 'discussion' and shows posts readers have written on the book. On popular books, discussions easily garner over a hundred posts, while some books have a few or even no posts. The content of these posts can differ greatly. Some readers post their opinion informally and casually ('I love this novel.I really like all the characters in this novel but i hate her mother'[85]) while others respond to questions –for instance, a discussion on whether or not a marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was completely due to the man's wealth. However, these discussion pages can become stale when the book in question ages; the last entry

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[82] Goodreads, Inc. 'Apply to be a Librarian', <https://www.goodreads.com/about/apply_librarian>(26 November, 2014).
[83] Shelfari, 'Sheflari [sic] Librarian', <http://www.shelfari.com/groups/10713/discussions/395537/Sheflari-Librarian>(26 November, 2014).
[84] See *Appendix 2*.
[85] See *Appendix 3.*

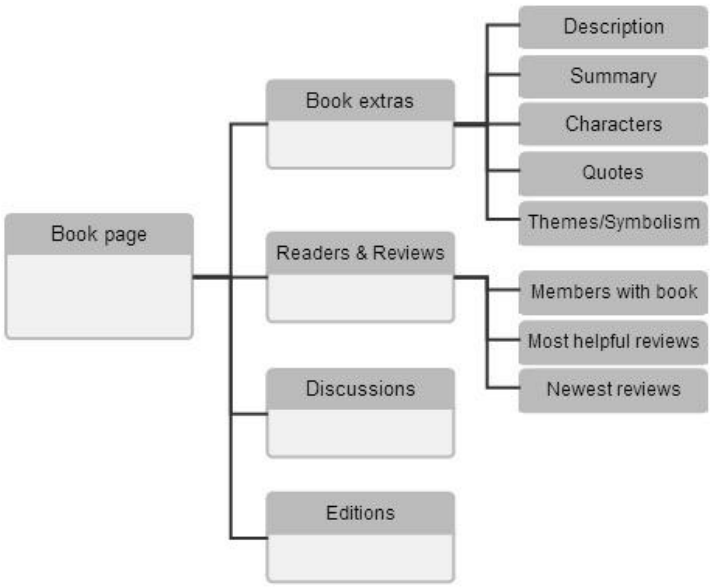

Fig. 3 Detailed sitemap of Shelfari's book pages

on *Pride and Prejudice* has been posted six years ago, and discussion on contemporary books like Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* has been stale for two years. Whether or not readers really engage in discussion on this page depends on the book.

Goodreads' book page focuses on the result of the reading experience: it shows friend's reviews, other users' reviews, and the greatest focus is on similar books. Book trivia and quotes are found at the very bottom of the page. But while Goodreads does not have the expanded information offering that Shelfari has, the readers use each other's reviews to engage in discussions about books. It is interesting to note that Goodreads does offer a similar discussion forum, but it is at the bottom of the book page, requiring extensive scrolling. Rather than doing this, most Goodreads users discuss the book in the reviews.[86] When a user gives an elaborate review of the book, other users can –and do– respond on points made, agreeing or sparking conversation when they have different thoughts. This way of discussing is made easier by the visual similarity the reviews have with Facebook status updates: comment threads line up underneath, and reviews can be 'liked'. This way of discussion seems to encourage more in-depth conversation, as the start of the conversation is often a thought-out response to the book. Everyone who comments has taken the time to read the review, and is thus more invested in a serious discussion. Shelfari's system remains more informal, due to the lack of continuity:

[86] See *Appendix 4.*

comments are not placed hierarchically, and conversations can crisscross through the page. Shelfari's reviews also allow comments, but this system is not as popular as it is on Goodreads (for example: a popular Goodreads review has 83 comments, while a popular Shelfari review on the same book only has 9 comments).[87] These discussions can occur with members of the network that the original poster does not know. In a way, the discussions are with relative strangers, without any personal attachment other than a shared interest in an individual book.

3.2.3 Group discussions

Both Goodreads and Shelfari have a special section of the website reserved for groups. They avoid coining these sections anything other than 'groups', as the existing groups are not necessarily reading groups, or book groups: people gather in groups based on categories such as non-reading interests, ideologies or physical location. However, a prominent category is 'book clubs'.

These groups are most comparable to the traditional reading group as described in the previous chapter. Goodreads and Shelfari allow book groups to add books to the 'group shelf', where books are stored that are read by the group as a whole. Group moderators can give deadlines for these books and there are forum-like discussion posts in which several subsections can be added. Depending on the group, discussions start off with a question list or an invitation to share thoughts. Opinions are given and views on the books are discussed, much like in they are reading groups. These groups emphasize the book as the central focus like their traditional counterpart, and due to the forum set-up, this is evident by the clearly defined subsections of the group forum.[88] Moderators are quick to redirect discussions and move off-subject posts to better suited subsections. There are posts about what is being read wherein group members exchange book titles, without giving opinions, as well as posts about other media genres, what people are doing in their lives, and chats for talk that is reminiscent of reading group members catching up before starting a discussion.

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[87] The book page in question was *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. The review on Goodreads was accessed on the book's main page: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1885.Pride_and_Prejudice?ac=1>(18 November, 2014). The review on Shelfari was accessed on the 'Readers & Reviewers' tab, by selecting 'see all reviews' and sorting these on 'most replies first': <http://www.shelfari.com/books/10310/Pride-and-Prejudice/reviews?sort=2>(18 November, 2014'.

[88] See *Appendix* 5 and 6.

Although most groups' discussions are visible for all users, a user must become a member of the group before being able to join the discussions. In this way, membership is just as necessary as for traditional groups, but an outsider can see if the group suits them before participating themselves.

A difference between the traditional reading groups and online groups is the number of members. Active online groups with engaged book discussions have membership numbers ranging from 700 to 14,000. This is in stark contrast with the seven to ten average number of reading groups members. However, only a small percentage of the online group's members is actively engaging in discussions. These twenty to thirty users often connect closely in the chats or discussions and share personal life details.

Another characteristic of the online groups is the universal presence of a moderator. This is partly due to the networks requiring a moderator in order to start a group, but the moderators take a hierarchical role in the discussion process that may be present in starting reading groups, but that is slowly taken on by the group as a whole. Goodreads and Shelfari restrict some group functions to moderators, like opening new forum subsections. Apart from that, moderators act as facilitators for other members: they spur their members on to vote for a book for the reading challenge, open up new discussions about books and remove off-topic comments to more suitable subsections.

The roles moderators have can still vary greatly, depending on the group and on the moderator. In some groups, the moderator merely says 'Please discuss our September Group Fiction Read here'[89] , while another asks to:[90]

> please participate in this discussion by November 7, 2014 to qualify for a chance to win the themed bookmarks or participate in the annual reader's competition. Please answer any or all of the questions below or pose your own to the group: […].

These moderators tend to operate with more of a type of authority, by handing out rewards for participation, thus making the group seem more hierarchical. However,

[89] Goodreads Inc., 'All About Books Discussion', <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1973274-the-goldfinch-by-donna-tartt-sept-oct-14-group-fiction-read>(26 November, 2014).
[90] Goodreads, Inc., 'Ladies & Literature Discussion', <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/2028929-official-september-2014-book-discussion-the-girl-you-left-behind>(26 November, 2014).

most moderators participate as equals in the discussion, only logistically setting things up.

3.3 Online reading networks and reading groups

The three functionalities for readers –profiles, book pages and group discussions– on online reading networks are combined to create an extensive online culture for users to read and share books. The similarities and differences between online reading networks and face-to-face reading groups have implications for how the online reading networks function and the effect these specific characteristics have on the reading culture within the network.

One of the most important differences of online reading networks when compared to face-to-face reading groups is the organization. While face-to-face reading groups are mostly a grassroots phenomenon, and require little to no hierarchy for organizing meetings or discussions, online reading networks themselves are built on organization. The websites are built with express reading tools in mind. Further on, the networks developed according to the need of its users, but these changes will be implemented from the top down. Users agree to the network's operating method by signing up and will modify their behaviour to the options available, unlike in micro reading groups, where if participants are unsatisfied with methods, they can suggest different methods.

In this, it is more alike to a macro reading group, such as Oprah's Book Club. In order to facilitate the large numbers of participants both online reading networks and macro reading groups deal with, organization is necessary. Both Goodreads and Shelfari started out without the librarians who edited the book pages. Instead, all users could add books and edit information. The hierarchy was implemented when the sites grew bigger and unreliable information was added to book pages, as well as double entries. This need for hierarchy is not unique to websites who offer detailed information: in 2009, Wikipedia sharpened the rules for content editing after erroneous information was purposefully added to articles.[91]

As an effect of this, users on online reading networks discuss and experience reading in ways which are available to them on the networks, or use the networks' features to their liking. An example of this is how Goodreads' users often discuss books

[91] Noam Cohen, 'Editing Decision for Wikipedia', *The New York Times*, 26 January 2009, p. 4.

with each other by responding on reviews, rather than engaging in discussions in the forum designed for it.

With the focus of reading networks on the individual user's profile page and reading list, these 'social' reading sites might be more individualistic than traditional reading groups. In reading groups, the emphasis is on enjoying read books together, while the online reading networks focus on giving the individual an environment to express his or her own taste and find books that suit him or her.

3.3.1 Forming of self

Long briefly mentions online reading groups, although during her period of research, specific online reading networks such as Goodreads and Shelfari did not yet exist. She looked at groups that gathered primarily at forums, but observed similar reading experiences on these forums as found on the online reading networks:[92]

> Like face-to-face groups, online reading groups bring together people who are united by reading interests but who are otherwise somewhat different […]. In fact, members appear to be less socially similar than those belonging to face-to-face groups, because online groups do not emerge from daily interaction […] or organizational linkages.

As Long points out, there is a difference which readers interact with each other and the manner in which they do so. Face-to-face reading groups tend to draw in members with similar social standing or education, due to personal acquaintance. This difference might largely be due to the fact that users can carefully construct their identities on online reading networks. Yesha Naik investigated Goodreads users as they gave each other book recommendations, noticing patterns about the reading culture on the website that give some insight into users' behavior:[93]

> […] The fact that users control their identity on the site (giving away as much or as little about themselves as pleases them) makes them feel freer to state their opinions and suggestions than they might in a more formal context.,

[92] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 209.
[93] Yesha Naik, 'Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA Into Their Own Hands', *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (2012), Vol. 51, No. 4, p. 322.

As can be seen on the profile pages, users can carefully choose what others see and know about them. This extends further than personal information: although a user can choose to hide information such as gender or age, it is other information with which users can portray themselves in any way they wish.

In his work *Media and Modernity*, Thompson investigates how the 'self' functions within a Mediated world. He argues that the self is a symbolic project constructed by the individual, and that media play an important role in this construction:[94]

> It is a project that the individual construct out of the symbolic materials which are available to him or her, materials which the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity.

This construction takes place very literally on the users' bookshelves of the online reading networks. The user can carefully chose which books he wishes to add and show and thereby present themselves as a particular kind of reader.

Nakamura borrows from Ted Striphas' *Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control,* to explain the similarities and differences between traditional book culture and online reading networks:[95]

> [...] books displayed in bookcases have always been sites of public display and sharing, a form of public consumption that produces and publicizes a reading self. Cruising a book-shelf at a party is a licensed form of surveillance.

Much like its traditional counterpart, the Goodreads and Shelfari shelves are a public display of the user's taste. It is a way for users to construct the self: a particular taste in books forms an identity of what the user likes and thinks of as good taste. Other users can look at their profile and estimate if they have similar minds due to shared tastes.

In face-to-face reading groups, participants can carefully choose what to share with their fellow members, but these members inevitably know more than the self the

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[94] Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, p. 210.
[95] Nakamura, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*', p. 240.

individual is projecting. It is easier to control what is perceived as identity on online reading networks than it is in face-to-face reading groups.

3.3.2 Discussions

One of the more evident similarities between face-to-face reading groups and online reading groups are the active discussions. Like in micro groups, members participate passionately in discussions, whether it is on the book pages or in the book groups. Naik also observed this, and gave a possible explanation:[96]

> Some users become quite involved and immersed in the discussions. […] Perhaps this is a result of the fact that these online discussions can take place in an asynchronous format, with participants contributing at times that are conducive to them, at times even reviving discussions that may have begun months ago.

The fact that discussions do not require a time or location does give the participants the freedom to choose when to contribute. However, as can be seen on Shelfari's book discussion pages, these discussions can also suddenly become unresponsive as users are no longer interested in the book in question, or the discussion does not interest them.

The freedom of time, location and obligation of participating in these discussions, allows for staggering membership numbers for online reading groups, with only a small active core. While face-to-face reading groups create a sense of obligation by having a small number of members, causing the following phenomenon described by Hartley: '[...] it seems that the smaller the number the better the attendance rate.'[97] The significant number of members in these online book groups removes this moral obligation to engage actively in the group, causing non-active members who only sometimes step in. Naik points this out as well: 'Users may participate as much or as little as they like and still be part of the discussion.'[98] More active members do not judge less active members, but gladly welcome them to discussions.

Nevertheless, the active core of these online reading groups can closely resemble face-to-face reading groups. In discussions and chats, the members feel free to share

[96] Naik, 'Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA Into Their Own Hands', p. 322.
[97] Hartley, *The Reading Groups Book*, p. 21.
[98] Naik, 'Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA Into Their Own Hands', p. 322.

personal details and invest emotionally in other member's experiences. Long noticed this as well in her research:[99]

> One of the striking and unexpected similarities I found between online and face-to-face reading groups was the intimacy that emerges, especially in groups that are active and long lasting. I had naively though that writing might constrain the emotional expressiveness that characterizes many face-to-face interactions, but I rapidly discovered tremendous emotional expressiveness in the postings.

While members easily share and express themselves on online reading groups, as can be found in Goodreads and Shelfari groups, it does not necessarily entail the same kind of kinship Long and Hartley found in traditional reading groups. Sedo conducted an online survey to compare online reading groups with traditional reading groups, and some of her findings apply to online reading networks.[100] She found that online reading group members are less likely to see their fellow members as close friends (like the traditional reading group members do) and find the intellectual debate and accessing new books the most important part of reading groups. However, 18 percent of the online reading group members do regard each other as close friends. In the words of one virtual club member:

> "Even though we don't know who each other is, we have something in common to discuss and by doing that you become friends very quickly. I don't think you need to have face to face contact with people to get to know them."[101]

There is an important difference to note between the discussions in these groups and discussions on the book pages themselves. The first are often very informal and resemble the face-to-face meetings, with more personal investments.

The second type of discussions however, gears more towards intellectual discussions that face-to-face reading groups sometimes deliberately seek to avoid. On the book pages, users give extensive reviews in which the strengths and weaknesses of a

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[99] Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, p. 210.
[100] DeNel Rehberg Sedo, 'Readers in Reading Groups: An Online Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs', *Convergence* (2003), Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 66-90.
[101] Sedo, 'Readers in Reading Groups: An Online Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs', p. 81.

book are evaluated. The more intellectually and less emotionally based this review is, the more discussion it evokes. Here, users come who are not necessarily looking for new connections can discuss in a way to further appreciate the read book or find recommendations for similar books.

3.3.3 Literacy sponsors

Although the number of users on online reading networks is more similar to the size of macro reading groups, the operation of the networks differs greatly. It has already been established that online reading networks function mostly like micro reading groups: the discussion between readers is largely unmediated, unlike in macro reading groups where the group leader –which we can identify as a literacy sponsor– broadcasts a specific response to a book. Readers at home can only interact with each other as a response.

What online reading networks share with macro reading groups, however, are literacy sponsors. Though not as visible as Oprah Winfrey on her show, specific parts of the Goodreads and Shelfari 'community' operate as literacy sponsors by providing users with insightful reviews and recommendations.

Although Brandt does not include authors in her definition of literacy sponsors, it can be argued that they do fulfill that function on online reading networks. Specifically authors that actively use the options that Goodreads –and to a lesser extent, Shelfari– offer them. By spreading their opinions –as well as news on upcoming novels– they encourage and enable readers to read and express their own opinions. Goodreads also conducts and features interviews, and authors can enable an 'Ask the Author' function on their page. As Brandt says about literacy sponsors, they gain something from the sponsorship as well: while giving readers more enjoyment in what they read, the authors gain more publicity and can therefore attract more readers.

Publishers also have ways to reach readers. Apart from genre-specific advertising, publishers are encouraged by the network to create groups on Goodreads. Here, they can host giveaways for upcoming books, as well as place author interviews. Shelfari, which is more directly linked to the parent company Amazon, does not offer publishers this kind of platform. While publishers such as HarperCollins, Penguin and Random House all have groups on Goodreads, no publishers can be found active on Shelfari –nor well-known authors, for that matter. A possible explanation for this lack of activity on

Shelfari is the restrictions it puts on authors: as mentioned earlier, authors must become a member of Amazon's 'Author Central' in order to receive 'author' status. This service mainly focuses on independent authors, and as a result, few bestselling authors participate. Another reason might be that authors and publishers would prefer to be active on a single reading network, rather than multiple, and chose the one with the most users to reach a bigger audience.

Apart from authors and publishers, other authority figures can be argued to emerge from the networks themselves: by writing good reviews or giving interesting insights, users can be followed and thus gain more standing in the community. Useful input and a steady stream of content can lead to more followers in a snowball effect. Their recommendations or reviews function as authoritative judgment. By giving these recommendations and often providing a good ground for discussion, they clearly encourage and enable literary discussion and reading. Naik also recognized these relationships existing and emphasized the importance of trust between users when communicating:[102]

> […] Participants tend to "know" the reviewers on whose review they make comments. […] The way the reviewer responds or does not respond to this reverse RA suggestion seems to be informed by the trust relationship between the two.

This stress on the trust placed in the literacy sponsor appears in both Naik –on reading advisory from peers– and Hall when he discusses Oprah as a literacy sponsor. That users on online reading networks gain this trust from other users with the same authority as a show host, implies that their contributions to the online reading network must be quite significant.

Different from most literacy sponsors, who often have some financial or public gain from their activities, these users only benefit by the mutual enjoyment of books. Considering that all users can easily share their reviews or reading progress on social networking sites like Facebook, they themselves can broadcast reading behavior and thus encourage non-network users to get into reading.

[102] Naik, 'Finding Good Reads on Goodreads: Readers Take RA Into Their Own Hands', p. 321.

The effect that online reading networks have on their social circles might therefore be greater than traditional reading groups: while participating in a micro reading group will not quickly encourage non-reading friends to join in, online reading networks like Goodreads and Shelfari are lowbrow enough to encourage non-reading contacts to take a look on the network and find out what attracts readers to these networks and books. Thus, there is a more open, inclusive atmosphere on online reading networks that is inherent to web sites, which is reminiscent of the openness of macro reading groups like Oprah's Book Club. Even book groups on the network are freely open to new members and more often than not, the discussions are open for reading by non-members.

So while publishers and authors can –and do– effectively operate as literacy sponsors, online reading networks' users themselves operate as literacy sponsors as well to the non-networking world. By offering critical as well as lowbrow discussion, book recommendations and detailed information about books in an open, welcoming environment, it gives all the opportunities that reading groups offer, albeit digitally.

Mostly invisible, online reading networks themselves are the biggest literacy sponsor. The networks sponsor readers in enjoying and experiencing books, and sharing this with other readers. The networks offer the tools users need to engage in reading. While this seems self-evident, it is important to note because, as Brandt says, sponsors 'gain advantage in some way' from their sponsorship.[103] Goodreads and Shelfari are both owned by Amazon.com, and the link between book recommendation sites and the biggest online book retailer is no surprise. As Nakamura writes: 'recommendations from other users trump advertising as the favored vector for consumption'.[104] The public reviews and recommendations on Goodreads and Shelfari can be used by Amazon to help sell books. A great number of booksellers and users are reprehensive of Amazon's acquisition of Goodreads, afraid that the retailer will see customers only as 'data points'.[105] However, apart from an integration to Amazon's Kindle reader, Amazon has mostly kept both Goodreads and Shelfari's services as they were. This relative absence of the platform's owners and developers is noted by Vlieghe and Rutten as well. They show that developers are mostly invisible:[106]

[103] Brandt, 'Sponsors of Literacy', p. 166.
[104] Nakamura, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*', p. 239.
[105] Rosen, 'Looking for the Next Goodreads', p. 7.
[106] Vlieghe & Rutten, 'Rhetorical Analysis of Literary Culture in Social Reading Platforms', n. pag.

> In fact, explicit self-references made by the developers are very scarce, though not entirely absent. When developers do refer to themselves, they do so through the social reading platform.

The literacy sponsorship of the platform's owners and developers is thus only by offering a platform for engaging in literature with others. The data that platform users provide, such as reviews and reading statistics, are the benefit for the platform's owners.

4 Conclusion

This conclusion will use the observations and analysis of the previous chapters to answer the thesis question as stated in the Introduction: *how do online reading networks function in comparison to physical reading groups and what effects do their differences and similarities have on the online reading network's reading culture?*

4.1 Comparison between physical reading groups and online reading networks

In order to compare online reading networks with physical reading groups, the latter had to be examined. The first well-documented cases of reading groups and societies were created to connect reading and social interaction. Important reasons to found these groups were the exchange of ideas, as well as formation of the self.

An important distinction has been made between macro reading groups and micro reading groups. Macro reading groups are groups with a large number of members, which often have an organization or person initiating the group and leading it. Micro reading groups are significantly smaller, and have an informal setting and little to no hierarchy between members.

In comparison to reading groups, online reading networks have characteristics that differ majorly from physical reading groups. The networks offers members three distinct methods of sharing reading experiences: by showcasing their bookshelves and what they have read, by encouraging intellectual exchange and discussion on book pages, and lengthier discussions in group forums. Each of these methods can be found in physical reading groups, but most reading groups focus on only one of these methods. The online reading network furthermore stands between the macro and the micro reading groups, because its shares characteristics with both. The number of users of online reading networks is comparable to the staggering numbers of macro reading group participants, and the networks' infrastructure is designed to offer all these different users the necessary tools for sharing their reading experience. At the same time, the contact between users on the online reading networks is more similar to micro reading group behavior, with users that can communicate with one another directly. Users discuss books as equals and discussions are often accompanied by casual chats about everyday life.

In the second chapter, three important characteristics for reading groups were determined: the formation of self, the non-intellectual character of discussions and the

sense of community. In the last chapter, online reading networks were compared with these characteristics in mind.

In both traditional reading groups and online reading networks, the formation of self is an important goal for the participant. Through reading and discussing, participants form their identity around interests and opinions regarding the books they read in these social settings. In online reading networks, this goal of social reading is amplified due to the degree in which users can form their own profile. This way, they can mold the self they project towards other users of the network. By specifically choosing what books to associate with their selves, as well as which groups to participate in, they are able to construct their identity to a greater degree than they are in face-to-face group situations. This fluidity does not exist to the same extent in traditional reading groups, wherein members often know each other from other social circles and have more information about other members' social standing and education.

Although reading groups meet to discuss books, the intellectual character of these discussions differs between traditional and online reading groups. Where most traditional groups often seek to distance themselves from intellectual debate, and 'are more likely to value the sharing of personal experiences',[107] members of online reading networks sometimes actively seek out these more intellectual discussions. On the networks, users are offered multiple ways of interacting with books and with each other. On Group pages, discussions tend to have the same tone as traditional reading groups and a more non-intellectual character. These users tend to know each other and are therefore more comfortable in engaging in more personal reactions. Literary interpretations do occur and are not necessarily shunned, but are given less attention. However, on the Book pages, where users can post their book reviews, other users are more inclined to comment and discuss each other's interpretation. These discussions take a more intellectual approach, as they often occur between relative strangers who are interested in each other's opinion, rather than users who know each other's personal circumstances.

The third important aspect of both types of reading groups is the sense of community the reading group experiences. In traditional reading groups, this is often one of the most important parts of the reading group, while this sense of community is much more diffuse on online reading networks. Due to the network itself often calling all

[107] Sedo, 'Readers in Reading Groups: An Online Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs', p. 81.

members and groups together a 'community', this sense is somewhat fostered, but experienced in different degrees. As shown, there may be a close sense of connection in book groups between the active members of the group. However, for every active member there are a varying number of non-active members, who do not participate in group activity at all. This is in stark contrast with micro reading groups, where participation rates are consistently high –members who do not want to participate anymore, leave.

Apart from this are the discussions on book pages, focusing on the intellectual debate rather than on personal acquaintance and experience. Interestingly, it is here that Goodreads' and Shelfari's idea of 'community' works: even though the readers are strangers, they can engage in respectful and meaningful discussion, although never very personal. This sense of community is comparable to macro reading groups, where participants often experience a para-social relationship with the host. Despite not engaging in actual social contact, participants still feel a sense of belonging to a group and participate through mediated interaction such as letters.

The role of literacy sponsors in reading groups also takes on an interesting form on online reading networks. Literacy sponsors in macro reading groups are often the discussion leaders and initiative takers: prominent figures such as Oprah or organizations such as the Book-of-the-Month club. Micro reading groups, as a characteristic grassroots phenomenon, are much harder to reach by literacy sponsors. It can be argued that these groups have no need for sponsors, as they are engaging in literacy themselves, but it can often be found that book sellers, libraries and publishers support reading groups by offering them discounts, reading lists or discussion topics. The initiative for these sponsorships can come from either the group itself or the sponsor. On the online reading networks, literacy sponsors are internally active as publishers and authors, who promote their books by hosting discussions, interviews and giveaways. While both types of sponsors are easily found on the networks, they are not forced upon users. It is important to note that the networks' owners are the biggest literacy sponsor, offering users a place to share their reading experience, while profiting from the users' recommendations and reading information. On these networks, readers are more easily found and tracked than in traditional reading groups.

Apart from these easily recognizable literacy sponsors, the literacy sponsorship of the online reading network extends beyond itself: by making sharing to other social

networks easy, users can encourage and inspire friends and acquaintances to take up reading or explore the online reading networks they use. Word-of-mouth has always been a good method of encouraging others, and the online reading networks exploit this in an effort to attract new users.

4.2 Reading culture

The set-up of the online reading networks is more individualistic than it would seem on first hand. It most importantly offers readers an environment to catalogue their reading process and future reading. Just as the act of reading is often solitary, using an online reading network is initially solitary as well.

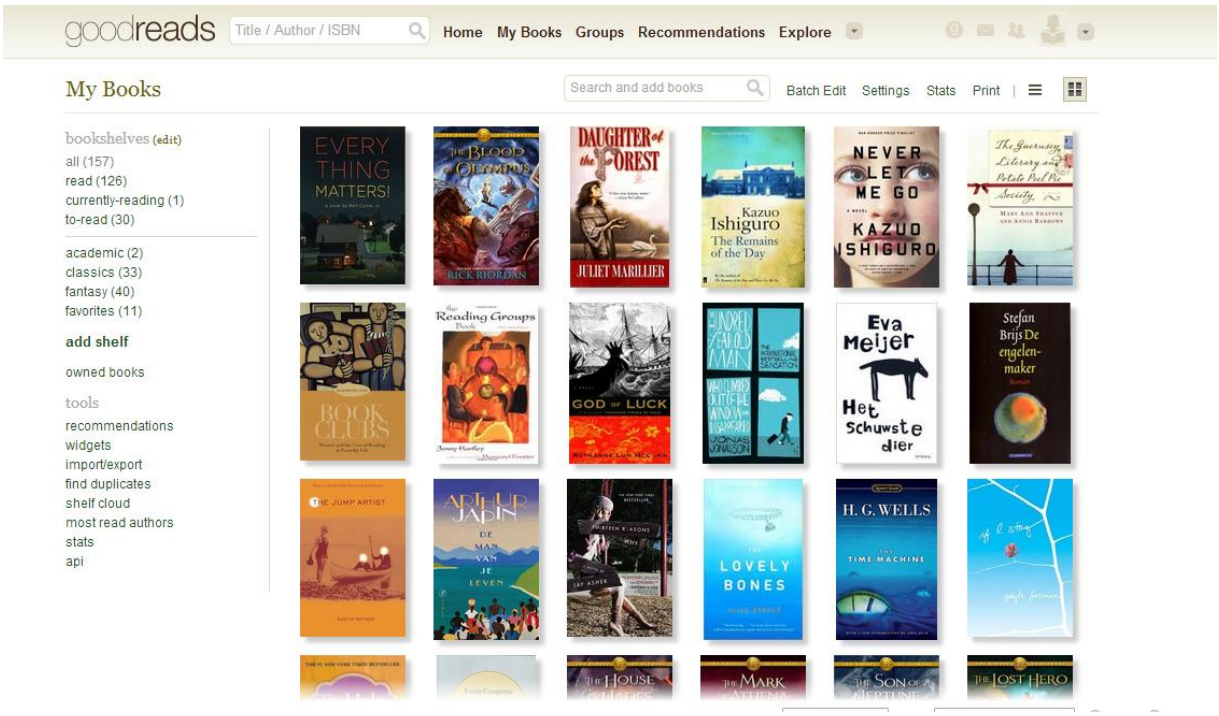
The sheer size of online reading networks causes them to be mediated by the networks' owners and therefore by moderators. To accommodate the number of users, moderators –called 'librarians' on most online reading networks– have to ensure that all content on the network is correct and appropriate. Seeing as these librarians have more privileges, a certain hierarchy is in place. Similarly, online reading networks offer authors a special membership as well, allowing them to reach their readers.

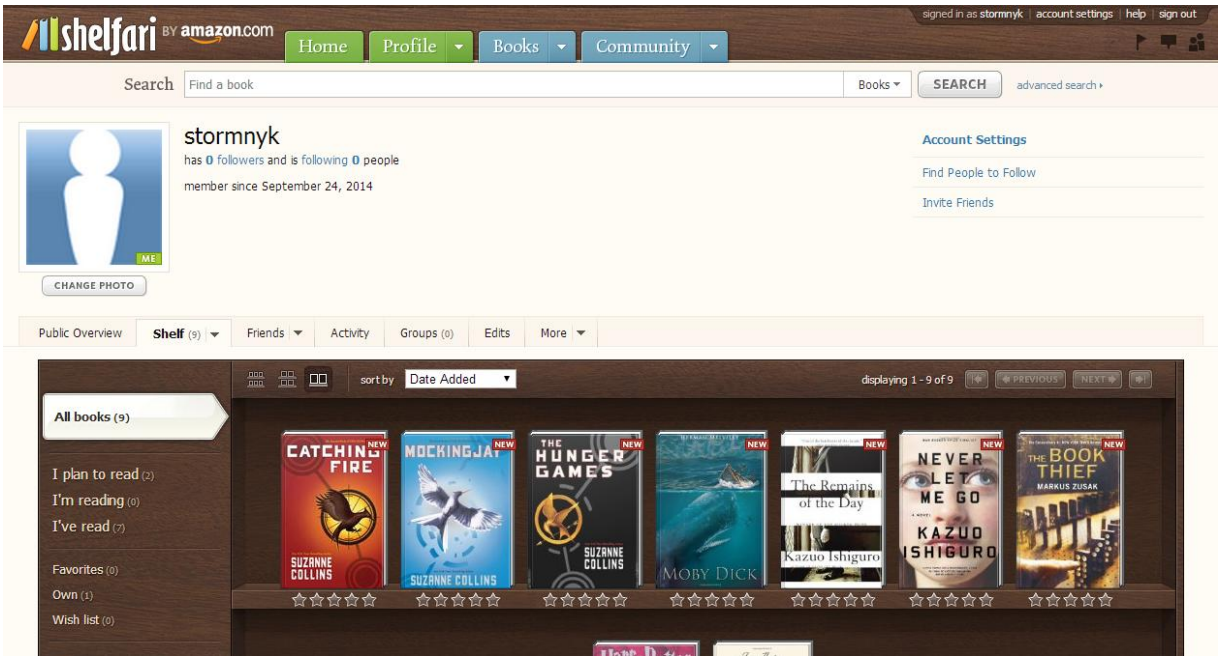
The user decides how social he wishes to make the reading experience. Because of this, the reading culture on online reading networks is incredibly broad and layered. The networks accommodate every type of user. This creates a diverse reading culture: intellectual discussion is possible, as well as sociable chats alongside book discussion, and advising others on what books to read next. However, there is no real sense of social obligation on the network. Although lasting connections are made between users, friendships like experienced in physical reading groups are rarely founded on contact through an online reading network. For all users, it seems a casual pastime, rather than a definite part of one's social life.

4.3 Further research

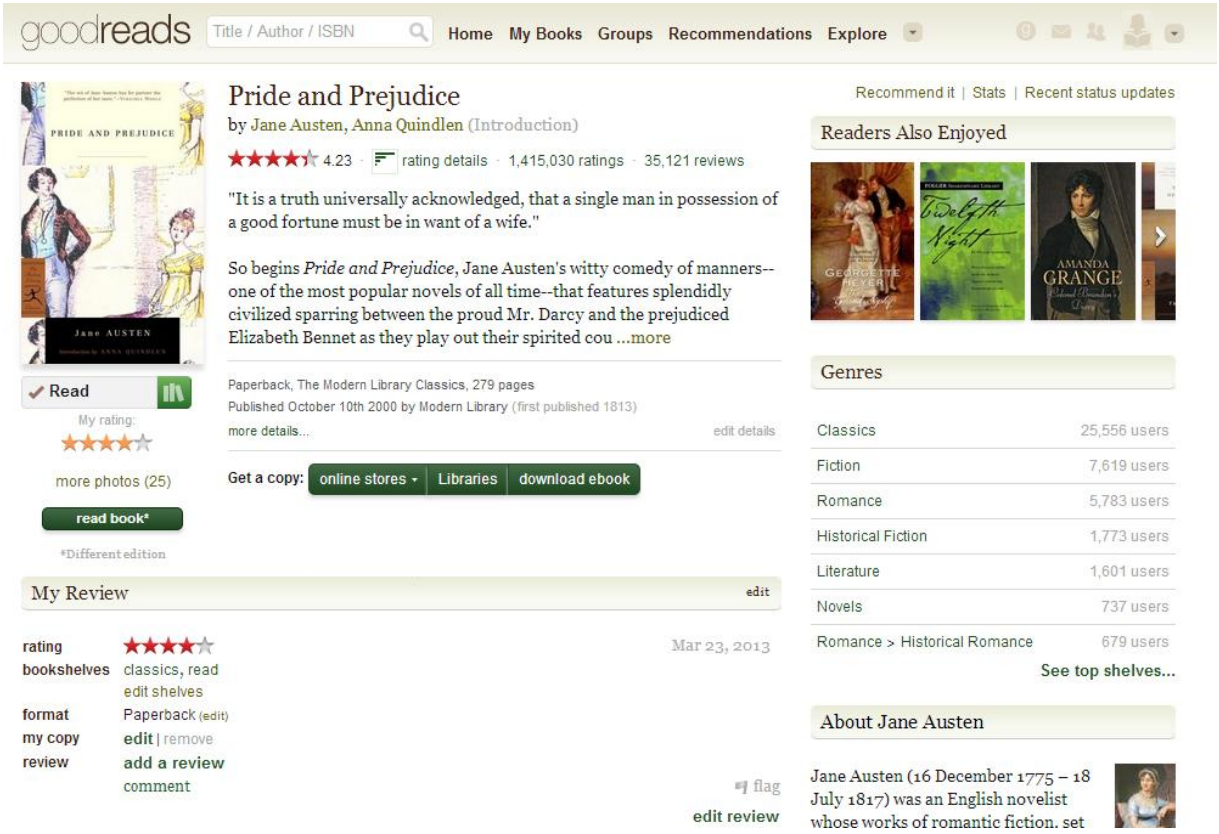
Online reading networks offer an incredible potential for academic research into reading experiences. This thesis attempted to explore how readers used online reading networks for their reading experience by observing and analyzing their behavior. Further research could examine how users experience this themselves by conducting qualitative interviews, as well as investigate how the reading experience is affected by sharing the experience on an online reading network.

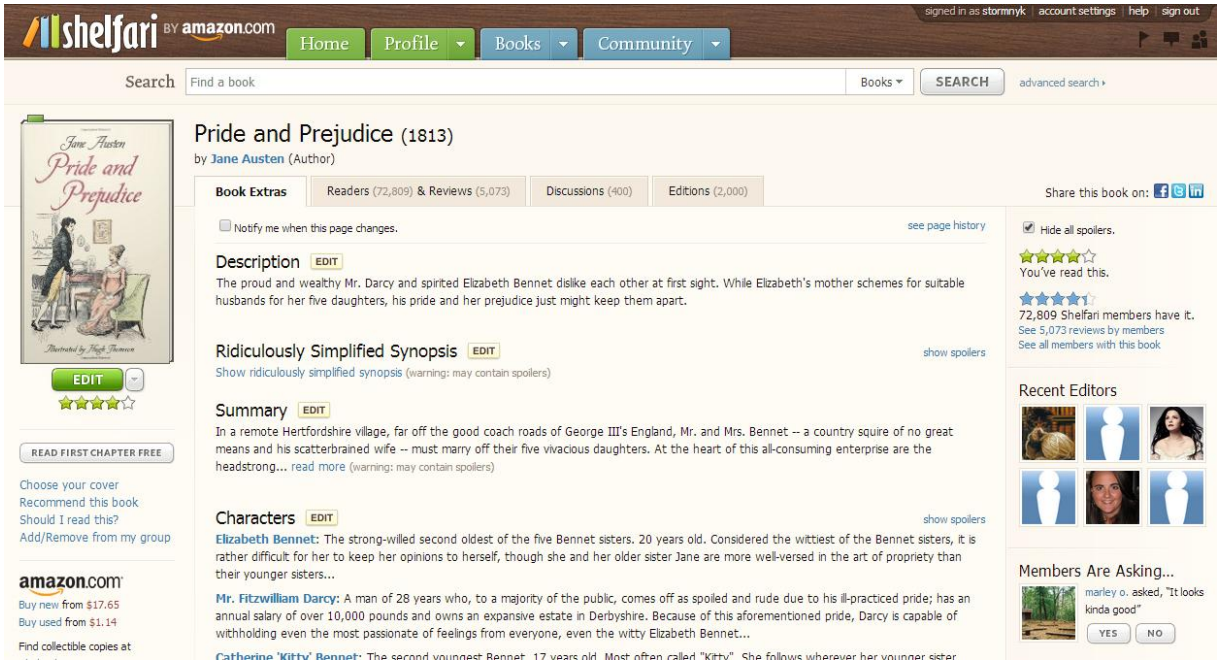
Appendix 1: Screenshots of Profile Pages on Goodreads.com and Shelfari.com



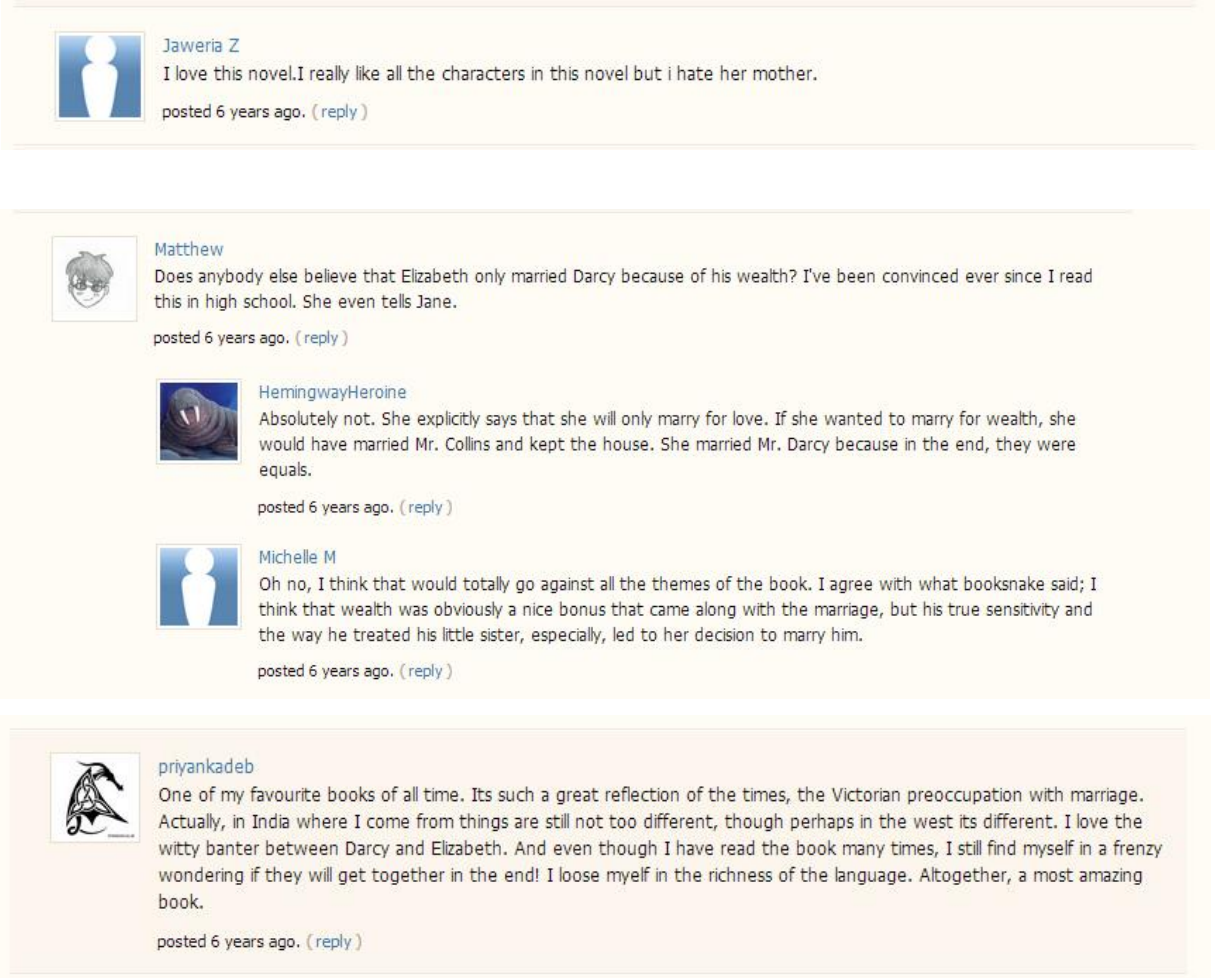


Appendix 2: Book page of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* on Goodreads.com and Shelfari.com





Appendix 3: Various comments in the 'Discussion' section of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* on Shelfari.com , accessed at: <http://www.shelfari.com/books/10310/Pride-and-Prejudice/discussions>(21 November, 2014).



Jaweria Z
I love this novel.I really like all the characters in this novel but i hate her mother.
posted 6 years ago. (reply)

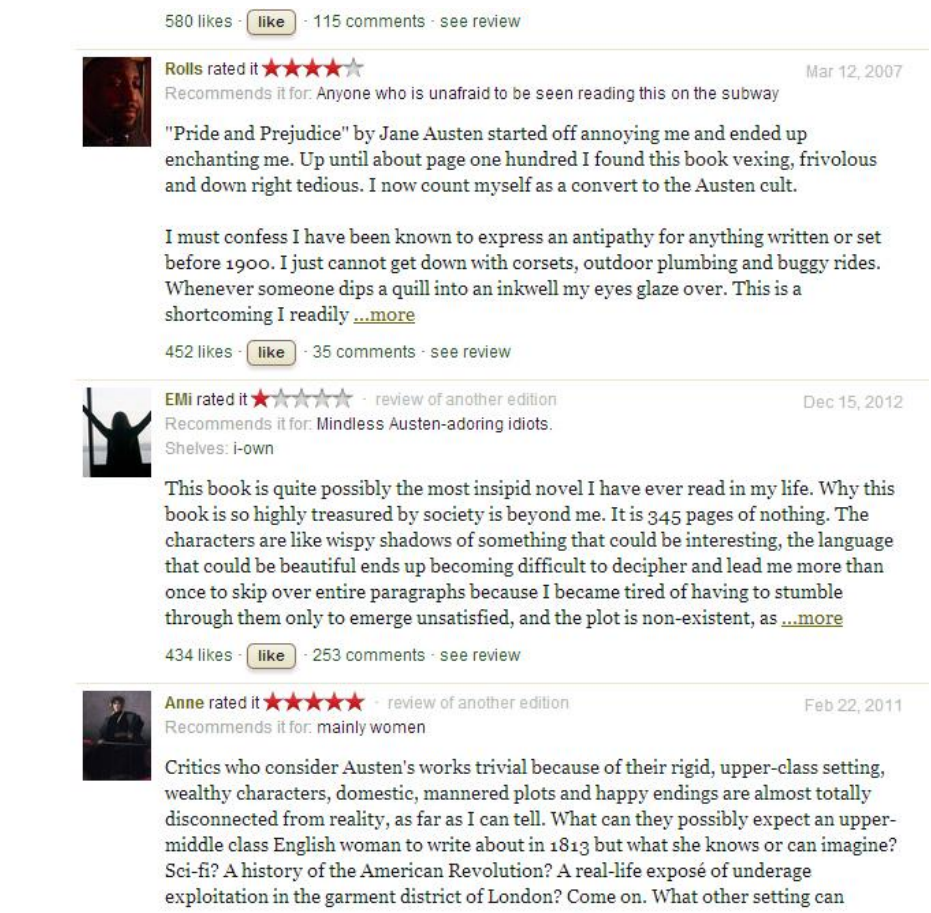
Matthew
Does anybody else believe that Elizabeth only married Darcy because of his wealth? I've been convinced ever since I read this in high school. She even tells Jane.
posted 6 years ago. (reply)

HemingwayHeroine
Absolutely not. She explicitly says that she will only marry for love. If she wanted to marry for wealth, she would have married Mr. Collins and kept the house. She married Mr. Darcy because in the end, they were equals.
posted 6 years ago. (reply)

Michelle M
Oh no, I think that would totally go against all the themes of the book. I agree with what booksnake said; I think that wealth was obviously a nice bonus that came along with the marriage, but his true sensitivity and the way he treated his little sister, especially, led to her decision to marry him.
posted 6 years ago. (reply)

priyankadeb
One of my favourite books of all time. Its such a great reflection of the times, the Victorian preoccupation with marriage. Actually, in India where I come from things are still not too different, though perhaps in the west its different. I love the witty banter between Darcy and Elizabeth. And even though I have read the book many times, I still find myself in a frenzy wondering if they will get together in the end! I loose myelf in the richness of the language. Altogether, a most amazing book.
posted 6 years ago. (reply)

Appendix 4: Book reviews on *Pride and Prejudice* on Goodreads.com and Shelfari.com



580 likes · like · 115 comments · see review

Rolls rated it ★★★★☆ Mar 12, 2007
Recommends it for: Anyone who is unafraid to be seen reading this on the subway

"Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen started off annoying me and ended up enchanting me. Up until about page one hundred I found this book vexing, frivolous and down right tedious. I now count myself as a convert to the Austen cult.

I must confess I have been known to express an antipathy for anything written or set before 1900. I just cannot get down with corsets, outdoor plumbing and buggy rides. Whenever someone dips a quill into an inkwell my eyes glaze over. This is a shortcoming I readily ...more

452 likes · like · 35 comments · see review

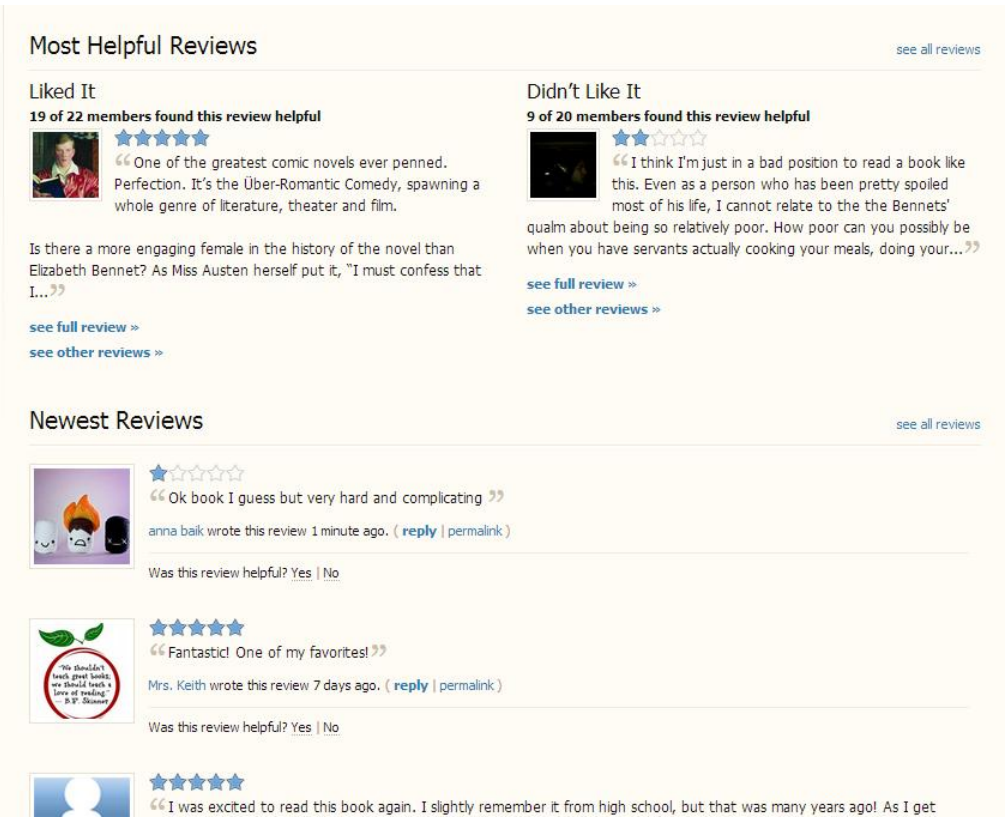
EMi rated it ★☆☆☆☆ · review of another edition Dec 15, 2012
Recommends it for: Mindless Austen-adoring idiots.
Shelves: i-own

This book is quite possibly the most insipid novel I have ever read in my life. Why this book is so highly treasured by society is beyond me. It is 345 pages of nothing. The characters are like wispy shadows of something that could be interesting, the language that could be beautiful ends up becoming difficult to decipher and lead me more than once to skip over entire paragraphs because I became tired of having to stumble through them only to emerge unsatisfied, and the plot is non-existent, as ...more

434 likes · like · 253 comments · see review

Anne rated it ★★★★★ · review of another edition Feb 22, 2011
Recommends it for: mainly women

Critics who consider Austen's works trivial because of their rigid, upper-class setting, wealthy characters, domestic, mannered plots and happy endings are almost totally disconnected from reality, as far as I can tell. What can they possibly expect an upper-middle class English woman to write about in 1813 but what she knows or can imagine? Sci-fi? A history of the American Revolution? A real-life exposé of underage exploitation in the garment district of London? Come on. What other setting can



Most Helpful Reviews see all reviews

Liked It
19 of 22 members found this review helpful
★★★★★
"One of the greatest comic novels ever penned. Perfection. It's the Über-Romantic Comedy, spawning a whole genre of literature, theater and film.

Is there a more engaging female in the history of the novel than Elizabeth Bennet? As Miss Austen herself put it, "I must confess that I..."

see full review »
see other reviews »

Didn't Like It
9 of 20 members found this review helpful
★★☆☆☆
"I think I'm just in a bad position to read a book like this. Even as a person who has been pretty spoiled most of his life, I cannot relate to the the Bennets' qualm about being so relatively poor. How poor can you possibly be when you have servants actually cooking your meals, doing your..."

see full review »
see other reviews »

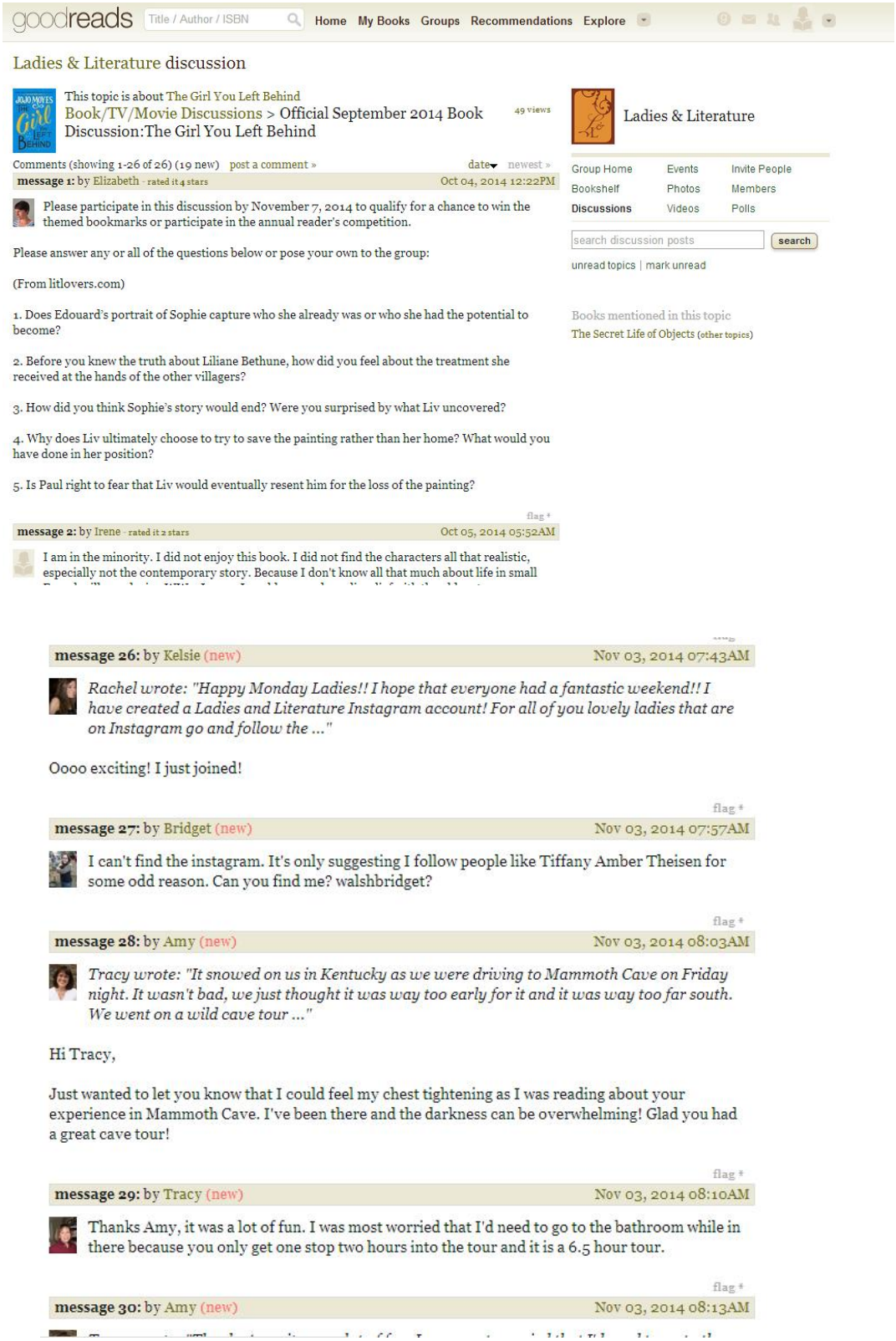
Newest Reviews see all reviews

★☆☆☆☆
"Ok book I guess but very hard and complicating"
anna baik wrote this review 1 minute ago. (reply | permalink)
Was this review helpful? Yes | No

★★★★★
"Fantastic! One of my favorites!"
Mrs. Keith wrote this review 7 days ago. (reply | permalink)
Was this review helpful? Yes | No

★★★★★
"I was excited to read this book again. I slightly remember it from high school, but that was many years ago! As I get

Appendix 5: Book group discussions and chats on Goodreads.com



goodreads Title / Author / ISBN Home My Books Groups Recommendations Explore

Ladies & Literature discussion

This topic is about The Girl You Left Behind
Book/TV/Movie Discussions > Official September 2014 Book Discussion:The Girl You Left Behind
49 views

Comments (showing 1-26 of 26) (19 new) post a comment » date newest »

message 1: by Elizabeth · rated it 4 stars Oct 04, 2014 12:22PM

Please participate in this discussion by November 7, 2014 to qualify for a chance to win the themed bookmarks or participate in the annual reader's competition.

Please answer any or all of the questions below or pose your own to the group:

(From litlovers.com)

1. Does Edouard's portrait of Sophie capture who she already was or who she had the potential to become?

2. Before you knew the truth about Liliane Bethune, how did you feel about the treatment she received at the hands of the other villagers?

3. How did you think Sophie's story would end? Were you surprised by what Liv uncovered?

4. Why does Liv ultimately choose to try to save the painting rather than her home? What would you have done in her position?

5. Is Paul right to fear that Liv would eventually resent him for the loss of the painting?

flag *

message 2: by Irene · rated it 2 stars Oct 05, 2014 05:52AM

I am in the minority. I did not enjoy this book. I did not find the characters all that realistic, especially not the contemporary story. Because I don't know all that much about life in small

Ladies & Literature

Group Home Events Invite People
Bookshelf Photos Members
Discussions Videos Polls

search discussion posts search

unread topics | mark unread

Books mentioned in this topic
The Secret Life of Objects (other topics)

message 26: by Kelsie (new) Nov 03, 2014 07:43AM

Rachel wrote: "Happy Monday Ladies!! I hope that everyone had a fantastic weekend!! I have created a Ladies and Literature Instagram account! For all of you lovely ladies that are on Instagram go and follow the ..."

Oooo exciting! I just joined!

flag *

message 27: by Bridget (new) Nov 03, 2014 07:57AM

I can't find the instagram. It's only suggesting I follow people like Tiffany Amber Theisen for some odd reason. Can you find me? walshbridget?

flag *

message 28: by Amy (new) Nov 03, 2014 08:03AM

Tracy wrote: "It snowed on us in Kentucky as we were driving to Mammoth Cave on Friday night. It wasn't bad, we just thought it was way too early for it and it was way too far south. We went on a wild cave tour ..."

Hi Tracy,

Just wanted to let you know that I could feel my chest tightening as I was reading about your experience in Mammoth Cave. I've been there and the darkness can be overwhelming! Glad you had a great cave tour!

flag *

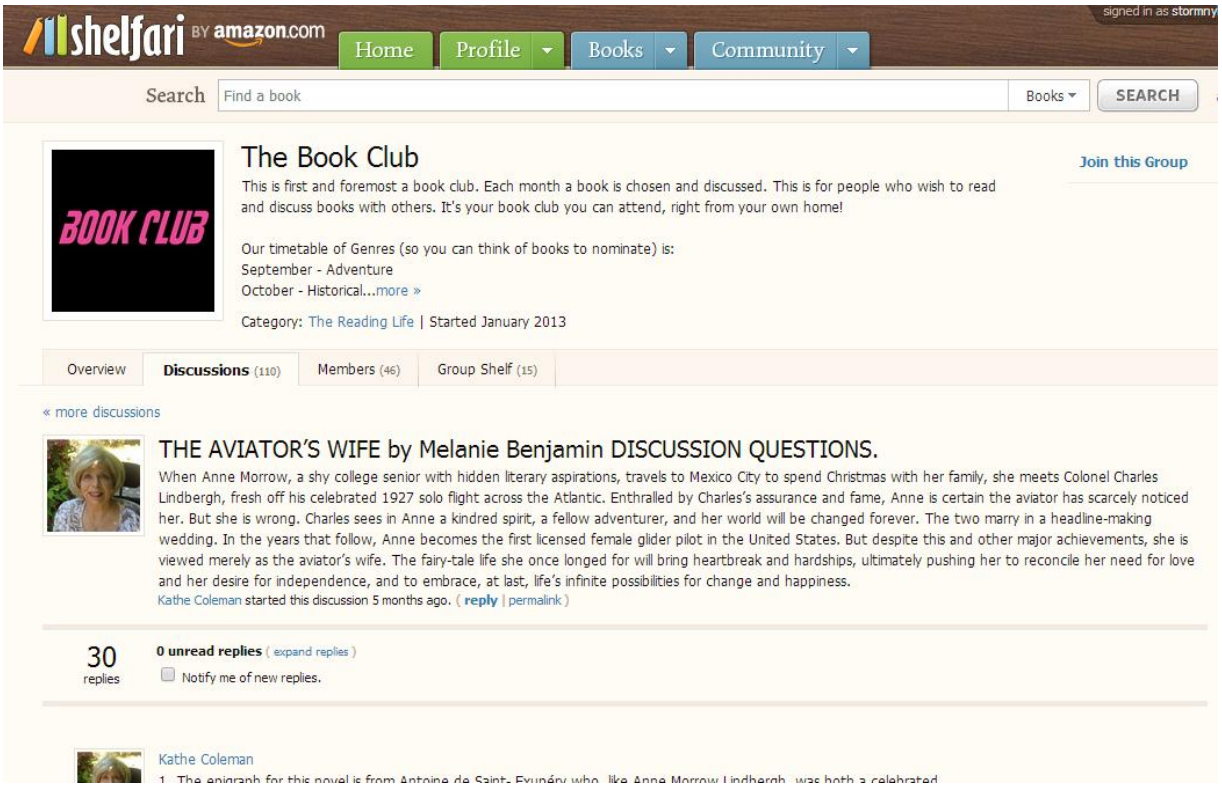
message 29: by Tracy (new) Nov 03, 2014 08:10AM

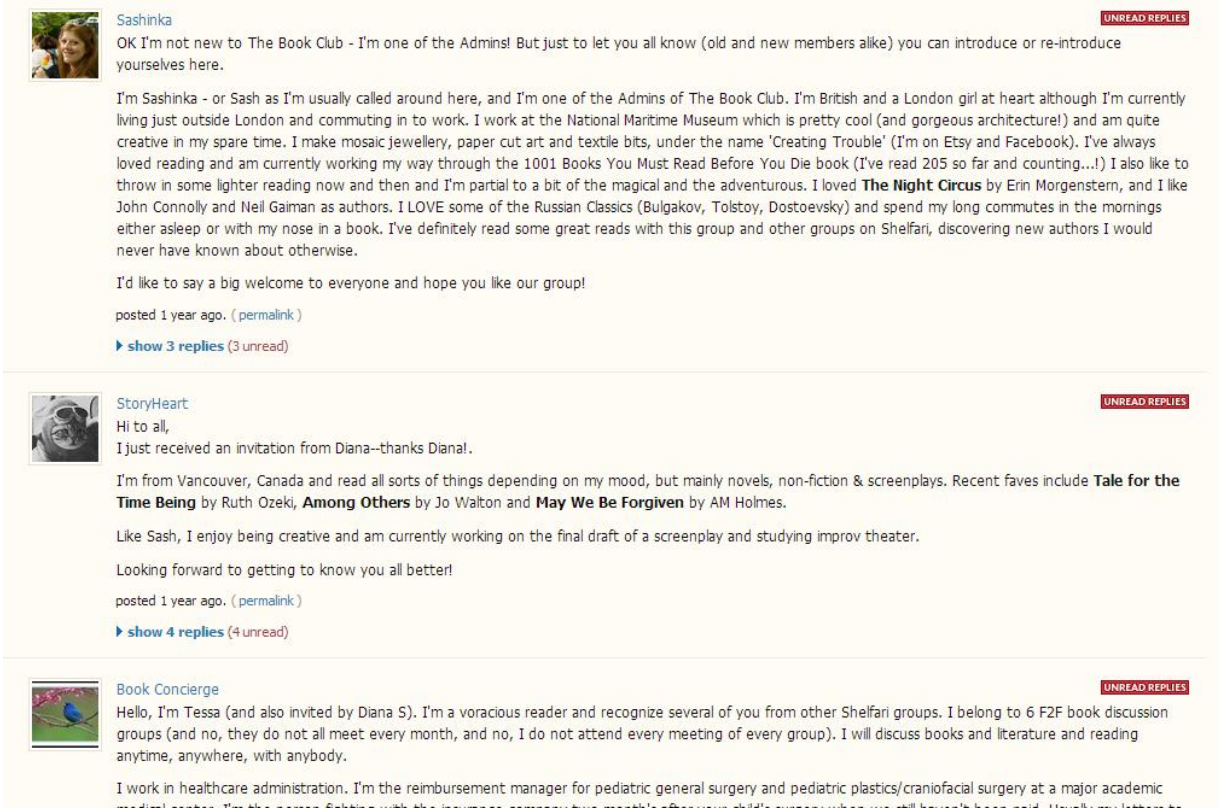
Thanks Amy, it was a lot of fun. I was most worried that I'd need to go to the bathroom while in there because you only get one stop two hours into the tour and it is a 6.5 hour tour.

flag *

message 30: by Amy (new) Nov 03, 2014 08:13AM

Appendix 6: Book group discussion and chats on Shelfari.com





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