



Introduction: The Late Age of Print

“AN IMMINENT CULTURAL CRISIS.” That’s how the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) summarized the findings of its 2004 report on the health of reading in the United States.¹ What precipitated the agency’s grim prognosis was a dramatic, 10 percent dip it had discovered in the number of literature readers—defined as readers of novels, short stories, plays, or poetry.² In 1982 almost 57 percent of adults reported having read at least one literary work for pleasure in the preceding year. By 2002 that figure had tumbled to roughly 45 percent and showed no sign of rebounding.³ With fewer than half of all adults in the United States reading literature, the clichéd conversation starter, “Have you read any good books lately?” was now more likely to elicit a shrug than a verbal response. Perhaps even more troubling than this shift was the NEA’s other main discovery: about twenty million people who in 1982 reportedly had read one or more literary works no longer claimed to have read any at all in 2002.⁴ In other words, adults seemed to be abandoning books at the alarming rate of one million people per year. Were the trend to continue, the NEA observed, adults in the United States would all but forsake the leisurely reading of literature in just fifty years.⁵

Little wonder, then, why the NEA titled its report *Reading at Risk*. Like an “at risk” child, reading seemed to be vulnerable, corruptible, and consequently in need of immediate intervention. The 2007 sequel to the report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, rounded out the picture. The agency correlated reading interest and proficiency with larger patterns of academic, economic, cultural, and civic achievement among Americans of all ages.⁶ It found, for example, that literary readers were almost

three times as likely to engage in volunteer or charity work than nonreaders, and that voting likelihood correlated positively with reading ability. On the other hand, the NEA also found poor reading skills among the underemployed, those who failed to finish high school, and the prison population.⁷ The implication was hardly subtle: without an interest in literary reading—which is to say of a particular type of book reading—the United States would end up a nation of deadbeats, dropouts, and criminals.

To be sure, the NEA's reports were jarring, but how surprising were they, really?⁸ For decades scholars, journalists, critics, educators, and book industry insiders have been sounding alarm bells about the well-being of reading, not to mention of books and book culture generally. Titles such as “The Last Book,” “The Bookless Future,” *The Gutenberg Elegies*, and *The Last Days of Publishing* tend to paint a bleak picture signaling the decline of printed books and book reading.⁹ Author John Updike summarized these concerns pointedly in his address at the 2006 book industry trade gathering BookExpo America: “Book readers and writers are approaching the condition of holdouts, surly hermits refusing to come out and play in the electronic sunshine of the post-Gutenberg village.”¹⁰ Ours, evidently, is an age in which the buzz of electronic media predominates. Amid the incessant flow of twenty-four-hour radio and television, the visual and sonic entropy of digitally enhanced cinema, the dizzyingly connective Internet maze, the kaleidoscopic intensity of digital gaming, and the frenetic pace at which new media of all stripes seem to shape the patterns of our daily lives, it seems difficult to imagine books shouldering much world-historical responsibility anymore.

The familiar story of the morbidity and decline of printed books is not, however, the one driving this book. While it would be a mistake to ignore these and other changes in book culture, there's ample evidence to suggest that books have played—and will continue to play—an important role in shaping the syntax of everyday life. Indeed, books arguably have enjoyed something of a renewal of late. In the last fifty years or so retail bookselling has reached unprecedented proportions. Innovative systems for coding, cataloging, distributing, and tracking books have been implemented. Book clubs have enjoyed a resurgent public profile. Moreover, the book trade has globalized more intensively than ever before. In this book I question commonsense understandings of a crisis of book culture. Books aren't as imperiled as some critics believe, and in some ways they might even be thriving. They continue to serve—sometimes in new ways, sometimes in traditional ones—as “equipment for living,” to quote Kenneth Burke's

memorable phrase.¹¹ In other words, books remain key artifacts through which social actors articulate and struggle over specific interests, values, practices, and worldviews.

Still, critics on all sides seem to agree that something *has* changed. The culture of books has been shifting—and continues to shift—under our collective feet. The relatively small and genteel publishing houses of the early twentieth century seem quaint compared to the cutthroat multimedia conglomerates that now control an estimated 80 percent (and counting) of the book trade in the United States.¹² The so-called paperback revolution of the 1950s seems to have lost much of its revolutionary fervor, given the ubiquity of paperback publishing today. Local independent bookstores seem imperiled by their geographically promiscuous corporate counterparts. Television personalities command unprecedented authority to make or break books. Whether one believes the relationship between printed books and other media to be contrary, complementary, or some combination of both, books exist in a more densely mediated landscape than ever before.

This dynamic chapter in book history—in which books remain a vital if slippery and perhaps not quite as central a force in the shaping of dominant and emergent ways of life—deserves a name. Jay David Bolter dubs it the “late age of print.” While I’m reluctant to use this phrase to describe an epoch or historical totality, it does capture the odd, simultaneously conspicuous and elusive character of books today. The late age of print, Bolter explains, consists of “a transformation of our social and cultural attitudes toward, and uses of, this familiar technology. Just as late capitalism is still vigorous capitalism, so books and other printed materials in the late age of print are still common and enjoy considerable prestige.”¹³ A refreshingly modest concept, the late age of print underscores the enduring role of books in shaping habits of thought, conduct, and expression. At the same time, it draws attention to the ways in which the social, economic, and material coordinates of books have been changing in relation to other media, denser forms of industrial organization, shifting patterns of work and leisure, new laws governing commodity ownership and use, and a host of other factors. The phrase points up the tense interplay of persistence and change endemic to today’s everyday book culture without necessarily presuming a full-blown crisis exists. More to the point, the phrase underscores the fact that we’re living in a period of transition in which books and book culture seem the same, only they are somehow different.

I’m neither prepared to write an elegy for printed books, nor am I prepared to make the claim that little has changed—or should have changed—

in the cultures of books over the past twenty-five, fifty, hundred, or five hundred years. I genuinely value books, especially printed ones. I'm surrounded by them as I write these words. Nevertheless, the purpose of *The Late Age of Print* isn't to make a fetish of books. A substantial number of books about books have been published over the last decade or so, many of which rhapsodize about book collecting and care, the inveterate passion for reading, the wonder of libraries and bookstores, the highs imparted by the smell and texture of printed books—in a word, what Nicholas A. Basbanes admiringly calls “bibliomania.”¹⁴ This book isn't one of them, at least not in any straightforward way. Singularly affirmative narratives about books, though often personally moving and poetic, can obscure book history's more sinister side. One person's bibliomania often depends indirectly on the exploitation of another's labor. It may also depend on potentially damaging forms of social and epistemological exclusion that flow from privileging the printed word over other, more fully embodied forms of expression.¹⁵

By the same token, I'm not cynical enough to suggest that printed books are anachronisms whose longevity only hampers our achieving a sublime digital future.¹⁶ Anachronisms aren't things. They're performative utterances whose force empowers people to sidestep difficult questions about the being of time and to install themselves as gatekeepers of temporal propriety. Hence, there are no anachronisms, only ways of seeing things as anachronisms. Whenever common sense tells us that printed books are dusty holdovers from the pre-electronic, analog era, we would do well to change our frame of reference. Books are artifacts with a deep and abiding history that belong in and to our own age—no more and no less so than flat-screen televisions, MP3 players, computers, and other so-called cutting-edge technologies.

If this book neither declares that there is a crisis nor denies major historical shifts, if it neither rejoices in printed books nor aspires to bid them a fond farewell, then what, exactly, is its intention? First, it explores the history and conditions by which books have become ubiquitous and mundane social artifacts in and of our time. It's worth remembering that as recently as the mid-nineteenth century many people living in the West still considered books to be rarities. According to Raymond Williams, “It is only in our own century [the twentieth], and still in incomplete ways, that books began to come with any convenience to the majority of people.”¹⁷ Particular books may be noteworthy—even precious—for one reason or another, but for many of us today books are also ubiquitous, accessible, and comparatively mundane things. How did we get from there to here?¹⁸ As Williams

well knew, the everydayness of books belies a long, complicated, and still unfinished history, one intimately bound up with all of the following: a changed and changing mode of production; new technological products and processes; shifts in law and jurisprudence; the proliferation of culture and the rise of cultural politics; and a host of sociological transformations, among many other factors. This book is about the prevalent and pedestrian character of books today and, more important, about a broad set of conditions leading to their constitution as such.

This first story largely turns on the relationship of the past to the present. The second story, which overlaps partially with the first, concerns the relationship of the present to the future. The everyday character of books has emerged gradually, unevenly, and in some respects paradoxically, for it has occurred alongside a general loosening of what Williams calls “the dominant relations of print.”¹⁹ By this I assume he means something along the lines of the late age of print, for he acknowledges “the new cultural period we have already entered.”²⁰ But what, exactly, are this period’s conditions of possibility? What are its defining characteristics beyond the persistence of printed books and people’s changing attitudes toward them? The challenge in answering these questions stems from what, I contend, is this period’s diffuseness. The late age of print encompasses both dominant and emergent values, practices, and worldviews.²¹ As such, it continues to take shape in the present even as it opens out onto the future. In this book I attempt to glimpse the contours of the late age of print in some of the most prosaic activities characteristic of book culture today: browsing around a large retail bookstore; selling books online; scanning a book’s bar code at the checkout counter; reading and discussing a popular work with a group; waiting on a line to buy a hotly anticipated best seller; and creating spin-offs based on popular literary characters, to name just a few.

From electronic books and book superstores to online bookselling, and from Oprah Winfrey’s book club to Harry Potter, this book moves among some of the most prominent—indeed, commonplace—aspects of everyday book culture today. Its aim is not only to map the prevalent and pedestrian character of books but also to explore what their everydayness might tell us about a gathering configuration of politics, economics, law, culture, sociality, and technology. More specifically, I argue that books were integral to the making of a modern, connected consumer culture in the twentieth century, and that today they form a key part of consumer capitalism’s slow slide into what I call, following Henri Lefebvre, a “society of controlled consumption.”²²

Bottom Lines

The connection between books and people's everyday economic activities is a critically important one. Yet for a large number of people outside the book industry—and even for some insiders—the link may be somewhat dubious. People buy and sell books all the time. They've done so for generations. Still, conventional wisdom says there's something more to them—something that sets books apart from, say, light bulbs, DVDs, automobiles, and other mass merchandise for which people pay good money. Laura J. Miller sums up the matter succinctly: “Books, as storehouses of ideas and as a perceived means to human betterment, have long been viewed as a kind of ‘sacred product.’”²³ The value of books would seem to lie, first and foremost, in their capacity for moral, aesthetic, and intellectual development, and only secondarily—if at all—in the marketplace. What makes a “good” book good—or, rather, what makes *books* good—is their purported ability to transcend vulgar economic considerations for the sake of these loftier goals.²⁴

The notion that books belong at a significant remove from the realm of economic necessity is one of the most entrenched myths of contemporary book culture. By “myth” I don't mean a falsehood but rather a particularly generative type of communication that trades on common sense.²⁵ For example, several book industry insiders have suggested that an unremitting concern for the economic bottom line took hold in their trade in the 1960s or 1970s, following a spate of mergers and acquisitions that brought some of the most esteemed publishing houses under corporate control. Before that ideas and artistry led the way.²⁶ What's important about these accounts is not that they're inaccurate but rather that they're inadequate. It may be true that the publishing industry of today pays more attention to profits and losses than the industry of forty or fifty years ago, but this statement can hardly be taken to mean that the book industry had subordinated economics up to that point. Rather, it registers the degree to which certain economic realities of the book trade have come to be seen as so customary, so banal, as to be overlooked almost entirely today.²⁷

It may be that the “crisis” of books is linked not only to purported decreases in the amount of reading but also to people's misgivings about—or, more accurately, their lack of historical perspective on—the economic organization of the book trade. The work of Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin is particularly instructive in this regard. In their pathbreaking study *The Coming of the Book* they paint a detailed portrait of the intimate and

enduring relationship between capitalist economics and book culture, writing that “from its earliest days printing existed as an industry, governed by the same rules as any other industry.” They add that most of those who have been involved in the production, distribution, and sale of printed books have tended to treat them—if not in theory then most certainly in practice—as “piece[s] of merchandise which [they] produced before anything else to earn a living.”²⁸ Books may connote and sometimes even provide for leisureliness, erudition, and a modicum of distance from the exigencies of daily life. That said, one mustn’t lose sight of the fact that they’ve long been tied to people’s immediate economic realities.

This point holds true even for those not in the book industry’s employ. Book publishing was one of the first large-scale industries to coalesce as such, and it did so in part by pioneering the rationalization and standardization of mass-production techniques. Its voluminous output—as many as twenty million books in the age of incunabula alone—depended not only on the successful implementation, diffusion, and uptake of a new technology (print) but also on new ways of organizing labor practices, class relations, and bodily habits within and beyond the print shop.²⁹ To wit, the book industry was among the first to embrace what was, even as late as the seventeenth century, a relatively novel form of compensation: hourly wage labor. Coupled with a more efficient production process, the move toward an hourly wage effectively boosted the creation of surplus value for master printers and their financiers. At the same time, it constrained seriously the socioeconomic mobility of journeymen and apprentices, eventually—and not without resistance—proletarianizing members of both groups.³⁰ Benedict Anderson’s expression “print-capitalism” aptly describes the close kinship books (and other types of printed matter) have long shared with the strategies of capitalist accumulation.³¹ In the union of these elements one can glimpse the beginnings of what, in both our own century and the preceding one, have proven to be some of the signature features of the workaday world.

Consider the fact that books were among the very first commercial Christmas presents. Not only that, but they were integral to the development of a modern Christmas holiday primarily organized around familial gift exchange.³² In the second quarter of the nineteenth century there emerged in the United States a new genre of books: gift books. These special anthologies, which publishers released on the cusp of the Christmas season, consisted of poetry, prose, illustrations, and, typically, a customizable bookplate.³³ The popularity of gift books as Christmas presents is attributable to many factors, chief among them their status as mass-

produced merchandise. Indeed, industrial production not only facilitated their availability en masse at the appropriate moment but, even more important, provided for their reception as tokens of intimacy and affection in at least two ways. First, a gift giver had to select from among many editions the one that best suited the recipient. Making the correct choice wasn't easy since publishers produced a range of volumes, each targeted to individuals belonging to a particular social set.³⁴ Selecting a mass-produced consumer good, in other words, became a meaningful expression of one's consideration and goodwill in no small part through the popularity of gift books. Second, the bookplates allowed the gift giver the opportunity to further personalize his or her selection, for they generally included a small amount of blank space upon which to pen an inscription. These pages, however, were preprinted at the factory, again suggesting a blurring of boundaries between mass industrial production and personal sentiment.³⁵ In any case, these examples illustrate the crucial role that books played in turning Christmas into a consumerist holiday. "Publishers and booksellers were the shock troops in exploiting—and developing—a Christmas trade," writes Stephen Nissenbaum, "and books were on the cutting edge of a commercial Christmas."³⁶

Books not only helped give rise to what's become the capitalist holiday par excellence but they also "were on the cutting edge" of a broader and more fundamental economic transformation that occurred as the nineteenth century flowed into the twentieth.³⁷ By this I mean the gradual transformation of capitalism from a form in which agriculture and intracapitalist exchange were primary engines of economic accumulation to one in which economic vitality increasingly hinged on working people's consumption of abundant, mass-produced goods. Books—along with sewing machines, pianos, and furniture—were among the very first items that people purchased with the aid of a resource newly extended to them toward the end of the nineteenth century, namely, consumer credit.³⁸ Although the practice of buying consumer goods on credit harbored negative connotations at the time of and even well after its introduction, an attractive set of books was considered by many to be a more or less acceptable credit purchase. Much like a sewing machine, it was assumed to be a productive investment rather than a frivolous purchase.³⁹ Clearly, the moral value many people attribute to books provided an alibi for their existence as mass-produced merchandise. Books consequently became a test case for debt-driven purchasing, an activity that's proven to be a lasting and even prosaic aspect of contemporary consumer culture.

Thus, *The Late Age of Print* explores not only how books have become ubiquitous social artifacts but also the cultural work involved in transforming them from industrially produced stuff into “sacred products” (and sometimes back again). One way to think about this process is to consider the tension surrounding the word “commodity.” On the one hand, it can refer to generic wares or an undifferentiated product, typically in large quantities, where there’s no attempt to distinguish one item from another of its kind on the basis of, say, who produced it. This understanding of commodities operates in places like the Chicago Board of Trade and the New York Mercantile Exchange, where traders buy and sell futures on soybeans, wheat, heating oil, steel, livestock, and other staples. On the other hand, there is the Marxist understanding of commodity, “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”⁴⁰ According to this view, what may have started out as a more or less generic, useful thing assumes a unique and almost otherworldly quality. This occurs as goods multiply within the context of their mass manufacture, which tends to dissociate the value of specific items from the personalities of the workers who produced them. Marx writes: “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyph.”⁴¹ By this he means that specific goods take on an identity or life of their own seemingly independent of human involvement, which then becomes an abstract index of their value. Instead of favoring either of these definitions of commodity, I wish to locate books in the tension between them. What interests me are those moments in which they’re treated either as generic stuff or as hallowed objects, as well as the labor it takes to transform books from the one into the other. This is nothing other than the work of culture.

Edges

The everyday is a central organizing motif of this book. In its conventional sense the term generally denotes a matter of routine, or the way things simply are, as in the sentence “I take my coffee with cream and sugar every . . . single . . . day.” This is a useful, first approximation of a definition. Here “everyday book culture” refers to a range of run-of-the-mill meanings, values, practices, artifacts, and ways of life associated with books. These characteristics are the “givens” of book culture, as it were. Their familiarity often

makes them recede into the deep background of experience, so that at first glance—and maybe even after a second look—they’re apt to seem boring or unremarkable. (Why do books have copyright pages? What allows me to pass along a book once I’ve purchased it? Why all those codes and symbols on the backs of most books?) Henri Lefebvre puts it nicely when he describes this facet of the everyday as “what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in a regular, unvarying succession.”⁴² Or, as Paddy Scannell eloquently puts it: “It is essential for ordinary existence that the meaningful background remains *as* the background in order to preserve everyday life as an environment in which each and every one of us can operate effectively by virtue of its utterly normal, taken-for-granted, known-and-familiar, yet deeply meaningful character. This meaningfulness *must* appear, in effect, as its opposite. If we could grasp it in its fullness its roar would overwhelm us.”⁴³ The everyday is what can be counted on, and as such its consequentiality can easily be overlooked or even forgotten. It’s kind of like trusted friends, who are there for us day in and day out. It’s as though they’ve always been a part of our lives, and the meaningfulness and stability they provide may not fully register until they’re gone.

My use of “everyday” begins from this (forgive the redundancy) everyday understanding of the word, though ultimately my aim is to trouble the sense of givenness it evokes. Instead of taking the everyday for granted, I follow Rita Felski in wondering how we “conduct our daily lives on the basis of numerous unstated and unexamined assumptions about the way things are, about the continuity, identity and reliability of objects and individuals.”⁴⁴ I not only investigate what people’s specific habits of thought, conduct, and expression are with respect to books, but, in a more critical vein, I trace some of the key conditions under which those habits are produced, reproduced, and possibly transformed. This approach leads me to question how books and book culture become intelligible at the level of the everyday, as everyday, beyond people’s immediate experiences with them.⁴⁵

Although in this book I may appear to focus on contemporary book culture, in significant respects this is only nominal. What interests me are the legal codes, technical devices, institutional arrangements, social relations, and historical processes whose purpose is to help secure the everydayness of contemporary book culture. Their inner workings and, in some cases, even their existence may be unknown or irrelevant to all but a small minority of insiders. Nonetheless, they powerfully affect what a majority of people considers normal, mundane, or run-of-the-mill about books today. In his study of radio and television broadcasting routines Scannell offers a useful

analog to what I'm getting at when he states that their everydayness "came to require . . . an immense institutional structure, the skills of thousands of people all geared towards the provision of programme services in such a way that they would appear as no more than what anyone would expect, as what anyone would regard as their due, as a natural, ordinary, unremarkable, everyday entitlement."⁴⁶ In a similar vein, a key question I want to ask is: How have books come to be perceived as "everyday entitlements," that is, objects that pretty much can be counted on to be wherever and whenever we expect them to be?

Like "everyday," the term "book" is also deceptively straightforward. It can obscure as much as—if not more than—it reveals. Most of us expect certain things from books, like covers; paper pages assembled neatly into versos and rectos; printed characters, illustrations, and other graphical signs; chapters; readerly amenities including title pages, tables of contents, and indexes; and more. John Updike has remarked that "books traditionally have edges."⁴⁷ In other words, there seems to be a certain solidity and a literal boundedness to the objects most of us call books. This explains why both scholars and nonscholars alike routinely use a generic term—"the book"—to refer to these objects. Yet that solidity belies the history of books, one whose only constant is the technology's relentless metamorphosis.

Books *conventionally* have edges, but they don't *necessarily* possess them. For all practical purposes people today tend to treat books—with the exception of anthologies—as if they were discrete, closed entities.⁴⁸ This hasn't always been the case. In the first century of printing in the West, it wasn't uncommon for a single bound volume to contain multiple works.⁴⁹ One could hardly consider these books to be closed, much less objective in the sense of being contained, given how the practice of their assembly—what, with some trepidation, we might call their form—provided for a range of textual juxtapositions. (The Bible is perhaps the most famous and enduring example of this mode of presentation.) Similarly, nearly all books that present-day consumers buy or borrow are finished works in the sense that they arrive without any need of additional manufacture. This characteristic is also a convention—and a somewhat recent one at that. To save on shipping costs, printers frequently sent unbound books to merchants, a practice that continued in earnest at least into the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ In fact, the practice of selling unbound books lingered into the first half of the twentieth century, though by then it had less to do with conducting business on the cheap. Custom-bound books had become marks of distinction in an age of ascendant mass manufacture, connoting the objects' rarity and their owners' prestige.⁵¹ In any event, precisely when in the course of their

printing, shipping, sale, and subsequent binding these objects definitively became books remains an open question. Maybe they were books all along. If so, then the word “book” denotes not so much a hard-edged product than a supple, diffuse, and ongoing process.

Reading is another aspect of books that is generally taken for granted. Though people undeniably engage in acts we call reading (you happen to be doing so right now), the verb “read” is about as vague as the term “book.” Silently or out loud? Sight-reading or subvocalization? Alone or in a group? Linearly or in a hopscotch pattern? Closely or skimming? Where and for how long? What level of attention or comprehension? In conjunction with what other media, if any?⁵² These questions suggest that reading is an intricate, multifarious activity, one that varies significantly across time and space. Little wonder, then, why Nicholas Howe has suggested that “read” and “reading” are among the most complex words in the English language—so complex and socially significant that they’re worthy of Raymond Williams’s list of cultural keywords.⁵³ In the present study reading denotes a range of techniques and activities whereby individuals and groups interact with the manifest content of books. Given the diverse skill sets and social relationships to which the word “reading” can refer, the more cumbersome construction “reading practices” might be more appropriate.

However it’s defined, reading doesn’t exhaust the range of possible uses of books. Though I tend to take good care of my books, two of them—which I’ve neither read nor intend to—currently prop up a bookcase, which was damaged during a move. For me these books serve a utilitarian function, nothing more; they will only ever be potentially semiotic. Some people even keep sizable libraries on hand, despite having read practically none of the volumes in their collection. They use their libraries to convey an air of bookishness or accomplishment, or simply to fill up what would otherwise be empty shelf space.⁵⁴ Still others use books to regulate and repel the incursions of others. For instance, Janice A. Radway has shown how the simple presence of a romance novel in a woman’s hands can convey the impression to those around her that “this is my time, my space. Now leave me alone” regardless of whether she’s actively engaged in reading it.⁵⁵ Books are more than just things people read. They’re also props, part of the décor, psychological barriers, and more.

Ultimately, then, this book tends to decenter reading. My purpose in doing so is to provide a more detailed picture of the ways in which people use books beyond treating them as vessels for meaningful, imaginative, or communicative encounters. I particularly want to explore the “circulation” of books since too often they conjure little more than images of col-

lectables or keepsakes. They can sit on shelves for years, decades, or even longer gathering dust—or worse. Similarly, the phrase “curl up with a good book” suggests that reading is a physically languid activity—one best carried out under a heap of comfy blankets.⁵⁶ Yet the fact of the matter is that books move, especially—but not exclusively—in the age of their mass reproduction.

From publisher to printer, binder, distributor, and bookseller; from library to borrower and back again; from family member to friend, colleague, and acquaintance; from hard copy to microfilm, photocopier, and scanner; from garage sale to second-hand store and beyond, books circulate widely. For some people their circulation's been a boon, providing relatively easy—and in some cases cheap and even free—access to what might be described as public resources. For others their circulation begets consternation. For example, those who have invested significant time, energy, and resources in bringing these intellectual properties to market often lobby insistently for measures to limit their circulation. With the globalization of the book trade, moreover, some people have come to resent the intrusion of books originating from foreign shores, especially when they seem to edge out locally produced works. Finally, for those knee deep in the trenches of distribution circulation poses countless logistical quandaries, not the least of which is how to keep tabs on millions of volumes each and every day. These brief examples suggest that the circulation of books correlates with specific values, practices, interests, and worldviews, which is just another way of saying that there's a politics to circulating books. In *The Late Age of Print* I am interested in the ways in which everyday practices of circulating books can both occasion and embody struggles over particular ways of life.

Sites

The approach of this book is strategically eclectic. Although it dwells where the history of media, technology, ideas, and mass culture all overlap, it isn't a work of history per se. It addresses the sociology of books and reading, yet it's not exactly a work of sociology. Although it ranges from literary theory and criticism to political economy and critical legal studies, it's a work proper to none of these fields. It's a book about communication, albeit one whose focus exceeds questions of communicative practice. What this book assuredly is *is* a work of cultural studies. Drawing on an interdisciplinary

ensemble of theories and methods, it explores how, why, and for whose benefit books and book culture become politicized in specific contexts.⁵⁷

The artifacts we call books naturally occupy an important place in this study. Given my approach, though, I am less interested in these artifacts in themselves than I am in what Elizabeth Long has called their “social infrastructure.”⁵⁸ The latter is best imagined as a network composed of intersecting material, technical, interpersonal, institutional, and discursive relations. It provides for the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of books, as well as for how people come to understand their uses and meanings at the level of the everyday. In more concrete terms, the social infrastructure of books determines—albeit never once and for all—the following: the physical and epistemological boundaries of books; the channels through which and the protocols by which producers, distributors, and consumers communicate about and convey books and the hierarchies by which individuals and groups come to value specific types of, and places associated with, books over others. My focus on the late age of print leads me to stress those infrastructural elements that have emerged roughly since the 1930s.

Each of the five main chapters of this book points to a topic rich enough for a book-length study in itself. I’ve opted to forgo a more intensive investigation of this kind, however, instead preferring to engage in a more extensive examination of everyday book culture. Intensive research lends itself well to exploring a particular object in greater depth, though it risks downplaying the extent to which that object connects to something and how. The difference between intensive and extensive research, in other words, is the difference between situating an object in context and treating the context—a multiplicity of elements—precisely as one’s object of study.⁵⁹ Both types of research doubtless have their advantages, though the latter may lend itself better to representing complexity, contingency, contradiction, and change than the former. An extensive approach also lets me tell interrelated, although not entirely congruous, stories about the historical constitution of everyday book culture in the late age of print. Each chapter comprises a layer that partially overlaps with and conditions each of the others, so that the narrative of the book accumulates gradually, unevenly, and, like sediment in a river, shifts along the way.

In more concrete terms, each of the main chapters focuses on a particular facet of contemporary book culture, or what I prefer to call a “site.” By this I don’t mean a fixed object or a bounded geographical locale. Rather, sites are “pressure points of complex modern societies.”⁶⁰ They’re simultaneously singular and plural—singular in the sense that they have a defi-

nite character and value and plural in the sense that these attributes are determined only in relation to other sites, though never once and for all. Each chapter begins from a particularly charged site of contemporary book culture in which books and people's relationships with them become politicized. I then proceed to trace some of the key historical conditions leading to the emergence of each of the five sites, in addition to the ways in which they've collectively come to define everyday book culture's most numbingly repetitive and most splendidly transformative qualities. This diversity of foci allows me to move between spheres of book production, distribution, exchange, and consumption instead of privileging one of these aspects over any of the others. The end result is a dynamic investigation of the social and material circuitry not only through which books are constantly traveling but without which books as many people now know them probably wouldn't exist at all.⁶¹

Even more concretely, I try to discern recurrent patterns according to which books are discussed in professional, popular, and more quotidian discourse. I draw primary source materials on the status of book culture from book industry trade journals, in addition to the local and national news media. I examine recently published memoirs and related accounts that reflect on a century's worth of changes in the U.S. book industry. I engage the voices of people who have—and, in some cases, have not—decided to make books and reading an integral aspect of their daily lives. My research encompasses television shows and bric-à-brac from the popular media that say something about books, everyday life, and the late age of print. I also look at imposter editions of popular literary titles, in addition to exploring the ways in which legislation and court cases affect these and other patterns of book circulation and reception.⁶²

Research into more than one medium has a tendency to devolve into hackneyed sloganeering (e.g., “TV kills books”), whereas medium-specific research at best can yield only a vague impression of the complexity of an increasingly crowded media landscape. Accordingly, I have been guided by the principle of “intermediation,” a term I have borrowed from Charles R. Acland to describe the complex relations that media share in determinate historical conjunctures.⁶³ Intermedial relations exceed the “remedial,” a term that Jay David Bolter and David Grusin use to describe the ways in which so-called new media borrow and adapt formal elements from older media.⁶⁴ Moreover, they differ from “intermedia,” an idea developed by the noted Fluxus artist Dick Higgins to describe hybrid artistic “works which conceptually fall between media that are already known.”⁶⁵ In a more affirmative vein, the principle of intermediation is grounded in

three main propositions: first, media shouldn't be isolated analytically from one another; second, the relationships among media are socially produced and historically contingent rather than given and necessary; and, third, media rarely if ever share one-dimensional, causal relationships. Rather than resigning ourselves to writing insular histories of what some believe either explicitly or implicitly to be a medium in decline, intermediation pushes us to assume a less defensive posture. It compels those of us interested in the recent history of books to account for the technology's contemporaneity and to stress both its contrariety to and complementarity with an abundance of other—equally timely—media.

Chapter 1 presents a critical history of the conditions of possibility and broader effects of the artifacts some believe to be sounding a death knell for printed books, namely, their electronic counterparts, e-books. Though I focus on the relationship they share with printed books, on the whole I'm less concerned with the extent to which the former may be a worthy replacement for the latter. Instead, I examine the emergence of e-books in relation to public relations campaigns, litigation, legislative initiatives, and other technologies—all of which have helped call into question the circulation of printed books and, implicitly, that of other mass-produced consumer goods. Through the technology of e-books, cultural producers have problematized the notion that a majority of people ought to own these goods, not to mention the assumption that producers must relinquish in perpetuity their rights to the goods they sell. E-books thus portend a shift away from the widespread private ownership of salable consumer goods to the periodic licensing of intellectual properties—representing a significant shift to a foundational logic of consumer capitalism.

We're often told that independent booksellers are the guardians of good taste, cultural diversity, and grassroots community. Economics is a necessary, if unpleasant, aspect of their day-to-day affairs, but it's certainly not what drives them. Corporate booksellers, on the other hand, are predatory, profit-obsessed giants whose business practices threaten to transform the mindful art of bookselling into something akin to theme park management. This story is like a broken record, but what does it really tell us about the politics of bookselling in the United States? Chapter 2 considers the conflict between independent and corporate booksellers and dwells on the conditions leading to the enlargement of the scope and scale of bookselling in the twentieth century. It also focuses on a specific corporate bookstore located in Durham, North Carolina. I explore the store's embeddedness in a local dynamics of race and class and show how its history cuts against the grain

of prevailing wisdom about the politics of retail bookselling in the United States.

The enormous growth in bookselling raises an important question: How has the book industry managed to keep up and at what cost? Chapter 3 presents a history of the technical processes and labor necessary to facilitate large-scale book distribution, or the back-office systems by which books have come to pervade everyday life. The heart of this chapter provides a history of the International Standard Book Number (ISBN), which the book industry implemented to regularize communications, rationalize distribution, and coordinate operations across the industry as a whole. The chapter ends with a critical look at online retailer Amazon.com's distribution apparatus, which weds ISBNs and other product codes to a massive physical and technical infrastructure. The company's fast-paced, ultraefficient workplace reveals how the everydayness of books depends not only on sophisticated digital technologies but also on intensive work processes for those employed in the area of book distribution.

Since the launch of her book club in 1996, television talk show host Oprah Winfrey has emerged as one of the key arbiters of bibliographic taste in the United States. Millions of people routinely swear by Winfrey's selections, much to the chagrin of established literary authorities. Chapter 4 explores why Oprah's Book Club has proven to be a source of inspiration and alarm. It dwells on the club's flair for connecting book reading with women's everyday lives, a talent that's yielded a distinct—and at times controversial—set of protocols by which to judge and read books. Hence Oprah's Book Club is a compelling site in which to scrutinize how the politics of reading, hierarchies of cultural value, structures of authority, and relations of gender all converge and work themselves out at the level of the everyday. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on an overlapping set of concerns, namely, the often vexed, intermedial relationship of books and TV.

Issues pertaining to the circulation of books and to the politics of intellectual property form the crux of chapter 5. It details how, where, when, and among whom the popular Harry Potter book series moves. Almost as captivating as the Potter stories themselves are the efforts of the rights holders to micromanage the release of each new installment and to police the appropriation of copyrighted and trademarked Potter material in a global context. The success of the Potter book series thus raises important questions about originality, propriety, reproducibility, and the global flow of commodities (in both senses of the term) in the late age of print. Who gets to define what counts as an acceptable or unacceptable appropriation of

another's intellectual property? What happens to popular artifacts once they move across geographical boundaries and into new legal and political-economic contexts? I argue that Harry Potter has much to tell us about the ways in which the once arcane world of intellectual property has come to infiltrate and invest the practice of everyday life.

The conclusion to this book explores what these five sites can collectively teach us about politics in the late age of print. It begins by revisiting the role that books and book culture played in the rise and consolidation of consumer capitalism in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century. It next recapitulates how key aspects of consumer capitalism—particularly the notion of consumer sovereignty—have been problematized over the last thirty to fifty years by agents in the employ of capitalist accumulation. Lastly, I contend that in the late age of print emergent techniques of control increasingly impinge on the creative ways in which people have for decades made use of books and other mass-produced consumer goods. As such, it's a period in which a particular kind of politics—cultural politics—must confront new challenges and constraints.