

A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.

By Janice A. Radway. *American Literature* 71.1 (1999): 200-01.

Made available courtesy of Duke University Press: <http://americanliterature.dukejournals.org/>

\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Duke University Press.

This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\*

***A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.* By Janice A. Radway. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 1997. xiii, 424 pp. \$29.95.**

From its inception the Book-of-the-Month Club imagined a serious general reader who sought not only accessible knowledge from reading, but also pleasure. Whereas Joan Shelley Rubin in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* emphasizes the Club's relationship to the genteel tradition, Janice Radway views the Club as a profoundly modern institution. Radway argues that the middlebrow as constituted by the Club did not merely ape highbrow culture. Rather, editors' reports suggest that the Club consciously identified itself as occupying the superior middle position, disdaining both the dry, specialized writing of academics and the obviously commercial, lowbrow writing that the Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club offered.

*A Feeling for Books* is divided into three very different parts. Part I, a

lively ethnographic study of the editorial practices of the Club in the mid-1980s, conveys its editors' passion for reading. In part III, the absence of evidence suggesting how subscribers responded to or used the Club's selections prompts Radway to examine her own engagement with these texts as a teenager during the 1960s, as well as her longing to recover the pleasure that her academic training stripped from her as reading became "work." Radway speculates that Club membership may have served as a way for those on the margins of the professional-managerial class to consolidate their self-identification as middle class, but, as she acknowledges, too little evidence exists to explore this issue in detail.

Part II, the longest and most provocative section, describes the controversy surrounding Harry Scherman's 1926 founding of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Under the direction of Scherman, whose advertising campaign had earlier launched the Little Leather Library Corporation, the Club targeted middle-class consumers who were anxious to organize the cultural goods flooding the marketplace without sacrificing distinction. Scherman's marketing strategies foregrounded the relationship between culture and the marketplace; consequently, the phenomenally popular book club movement elicited considerable hostility from some quarters. Excerpts from essays and reviews reveal that many literary professionals imagined a public sphere where readers rationally chose their books unmediated by the influence of a standardized consumer culture. "The scandal of the middlebrow," as Radway explains, "was a function of its failure to maintain the fences cordoning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high. Scherman challenged this separation in many ways but most obviously by too openly selling Culture, thus baldly exposing its prior status as a form of capital—symbolic capital, to be sure—but capital nonetheless" (152–53). Seemingly oblivious to their own claims to cultural authority, reviewers attacked the centralization of authority in the book club judges, fearing that the club system would turn independent readers into passive consumers.

Essential reading for scholars interested in the history of the book and popular culture, Radway's engaging and sympathetic study avoids demonizing the Book-of-the-Month Club as one more contributor to the decline of print culture. Rather, she persuasively portrays the club movement as part of the inevitable and ongoing transformation of the book, a transformation driven by both technological and market forces.

Karen Weyler, Wake Forest University