

‘Other people might like it. I just didn’t¹

Negotiating meaning and value in reading bestseller and prizewinning books

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ABSTRACT

GoodReads.com offers a place where readers can review and rate the books they have read. More than before, cultural audiences can thus express the interpretations and evaluations in public.. In this thesis, I use these expressions to study how readers created meaning in an online social network. Previous research has predominantly focused on cultural consumption patterns and its relation to social status and cultural classification, on the one hand, and on the use of aesthetic criteria by professional critics, on the other hand. I adopt a qualitative approach in researching meaning as well as value of readers actively seeks to bridge the gap between meaning making and value attribution. This study aims to research in what way reviewers on GoodReads make sense, evaluate, and relate to what they read. By studying 238 reviews of bestseller and prizewinner books, it will become apparent that meaning making touches upon three dimensions, each of these dimension delving deeper into the core of the reviews. First, we will see the great variety in which reviewers contextualise their opinion. Most reviewers offer a reflexive context so their readers can make sense of the review. Simultaneously, this leads to a form of distinction and classification: prizewinner reviews state their experience and knowledge, place the books in a wider literary context and mention the relativity of taste. Bestseller reviewers on the other hand, are more clear-cut in their aesthetic criteria, due to the genre-expectations they have. Second, the motivation to read books is closely related to the way readers appreciate different aspects of a book. A need for escapism in reading bestseller books for example, leads to a great appreciation and demand for the build-up of a clear plot. Third, the tone reviewers use to evaluate a book, using either more distant or more personal aesthetic criteria, vocalises a more technical or literal understanding of the book. It will become apparent that in researching online reviews, therefore concentrating on readers’ agency instead of mere readers’ consumption, we gain a better understanding in how people make sense of what they read and that indeed, reading bestseller books is experienced differently from reading prizewinning books.

¹ Rita (2009) in reviewing the book Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Strout

1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to increase our understanding of how readers relate to what they read by writing online reviews, and more precisely, what value and meaning they attribute to books they consume. Classic studies by Radway (1991) and Long (2003) have paved the way for the study of participation motives, meaning making and practices of 'ordinary' readers (as opposed to focusing on those that read for their living: professional reviewers). At the same time, cultural 'value' has been a topic of interest for scholars of cultural consumption - focusing on patterns of consumption, matters of distinction, and cultural classification as created by, for instance, professional critics in the spirit of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987; DiMaggio, 1991; Baumann, 2007; Schmutz et al., 2010). I argue that with the rise of online social media an urgency to bridge the gap between 'meaning' and 'value' has come to the foreground. In this new media landscape, researching 'meaning' in relation to audience's reception as a social activity alone is not sufficient. Also, professional critics are no longer undisputed gatekeepers of cultural value. These boundaries have shifted. As Verboord (2013) has stressed: with the rise of new media and the internet, lay users can bypass institutional gatekeepers who traditionally attributed value to cultural products in a top-down matter, which may threaten the traditional cultural hierarchy and its underlying value attributions. However, both reception studies, and work on omnivorousness and cultural classifications by critics, can on their own not account for the great success of user-generated content online and its effect on the literary field.

In this research, my aim is to bridge this gap between these two academic traditions in researching cultural reception to study meaning making and value attribution in joint analysis. I focus on how readers in a social network discuss two types of books: bestsellers (which are popular among other audience members) and prizewinning books (which are consecrated by institutionally embedded evaluators). This distinction is important, since it allows me to analyse how audiences relate to judgments of different kind of social groups.

The results show that reviewers of prizewinning books contextualise their opinion differently, use different aesthetic criteria, have different motivations to read and ultimately, have a different relation to the books they read altogether. Bestseller reviewers are much more definite and stern in their criteria, and are much less inclined to negotiate the terms of good and bad in a technical albeit personal and relativistic matter (as prizewinner reviewers do). To be sure, some of the readers still make distinctions between genres or high- and lowbrow books, and express their view on the literary world explicitly and with confidence. Donna Tartt's book the Gold Finch, both a prizewinner and a best seller², also illustrates, however, that these clear distinctions between the

² The Gold Finch by Donna Tartt is the winner of the Pulitzer Price 2014 category Fiction, as well as being a NY-Times bestseller in 2014.

two types are under pressure. These shifting classifications have been studied focusing on researching aesthetic criteria of professional critics mostly. When studying audience reception, the focus is traditionally on meaning making in a social context. In the middle however, remains the understudied ground of user-generated content and their aesthetic evaluation (Verboord, 2013), which urgently deserves more attention to account for new ways of cultural classification.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Studying cultural reception: meaning making

The tradition of studying cultural reception and meaning making has its premise in understanding agency of the recipient in consuming a cultural product. Griswold (1987) speaks of cultural power as the capacity of a cultural work to carry a multitude of meanings, coming to the forefront when readers engage with a text. Two scholars who have developed the study of meaning making among readers in particular are Long (2003) and Radway (1991), both taking the agency of readers seriously in an age when readers could not yet express opinions on the Internet. Radway describes the meaning making process as 'a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes' (1991: 7). Long takes the concept of reading as a social activity further by investigating book reading groups in the Houston area (U.S.A.). She demonstrates that for women, reading, but even more so, being member of a book club can serve as a means to reflect on the meaning of their own lives and their place in the world in a creative manner. Referring to Radway, Long claims that concentrating on readers' agency instead of studying the writer's intentions will make us better understand the social nature of reading, and consequently how meanings are derived from books .

Focusing on this readers' agency in the study of literature is a shift from focusing on the body of literary works via critics' assessments, according to Griswold (1993), and is a move from the production-of-culture approach in which readers' agency and interpretation was not considered (for other examples of this approach see Jenkins (1992) and Liebes & Katz (1986)). As I will argue later in more detail, this recognition of readers' agency is imperative in the study of book reading in today's multimedia landscape. However, this tradition of studying meaning making with its focus on the social activity of reading (a more recent example found in Vlieghe et al. (2016) about reading in relation to social online affinity spaces) tends to overlook another important aspect of meaning making: attributing cultural value and aesthetic criteria to cultural works. Interestingly, Childress and Friedkin (2012) have also emphasised the social process of meaning making, yet claim we should not overstate the influence of other peoples' opinion: they found that readers seek out other people's evaluations but not in order to change their own.

Apart from being a social outlet books clubs, and more recently online social platforms, also actively negotiate what is 'good taste' and reconsider culturally made distinctions between books worth taking seriously and worth reading, and those not. Lacking is a more comprehensive view

not just on meaning making as a social activity, but also meaning making as a manner of cultural distinction.

2.2 Studying cultural classifications: value

Most studies on cultural distinction and value attribution start with Bourdieu's work (1983) on the literary field. Bourdieu maps out the literary field as a field of power and forces wherein its' actors try to either secure their high status or establish a status to begin with. In his view, professional critics play a key role in this as gatekeepers (see also Janssen & Verboord, 2015). At the same time, Bourdieu's work explains the difference in cultural taste among different social classes. Social status and cultural consumption are highly related: those among the higher social classes seek out art forms that require more intellectual and cultural knowledge in order to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, who, in turn, are driven by motivations of entertainment and enjoyment in their cultural consumption.

This analysis has been nuanced and partly adapted in recent decades, particularly since Peterson and Kern's (1996) article about the shift from an elite cultural univore towards an omnivore cultural consumer. No longer are 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' key aspects, but for understanding the behaviour of the cultural omnivore, it is important to realise that the omnivore does not like any type of art form whether high or low regardless. Increasingly, being more open towards different art forms, and being less elitist is the norm.

In this sense, it is important how Peterson (1997) relates these changes to changes in value production: more value is attributed to tolerance for a multitude of viewpoints, and rigid standards about what good art should comprise are shifting, as are the boundaries of the traditional dominant class. He proposes an upside-down pyramidal hierarchy: ranging from an omnivore with a wide variety of likings and preferences to the univore, liking just a couple of styles with stronger dislikes (Peterson, 1992; 1997). This new hierarchy is considered to be the product of shifting society (and also leads to struggles in the middle classes who, according to Van Eijck (2000), increasingly attempt to gain knowledge on a wide variety of fields) and a move away from thinking of cultural products in mere terms of "high" and "low". As such, it signals the growing importance of popular culture.

Supporting the claim that Radway, Long and Griswold have made (alongside other reception-oriented researchers), Peterson (1992) emphasises the relevance to not just look at *what* someone consumes, but *in what way* they make sense and value what they consume. The aesthetic understanding of consumers, and the narratives they use to express these reflections, might shine more light to their cultural consumption behaviour than their exact pattern of consumption.

Some research has done exactly that, although mostly from a professional critics' standpoint (e.g. Shrum, 1991; Janssen, 1997). Still lacking however, is a clear understanding of how these shifts matter for mapping out cultural boundaries and classifications, in light of the rise of the online communities of amateur reviewers.

Aesthetic criteria and the (diminishing) role of the critics

Cultural classification and the production of symbolic value has traditionally been studied mostly by analysing how institutionally embedded (most often professional) critics evaluate and which aesthetic criteria they use (e.g. Van Rees, 1987; Janssen, 1997; Baumann, 2001). Lamont and Molnár (2002) discuss the importance of studying both symbolic and social boundaries: critics - as well as consumers and writers - either set themselves apart or make stronger connections with others in expression of their opinion. Bourdieu's notion of distinction (1984) and his view of the literary world as a field in which a power struggle is never ending, resonates through most research about the role of the critic. For instance, De Nooy's (1991) work on social networks and classification in literature depends heavily on insights from Bourdieu's (1983) study of the literary field. He shows how classification in the literary world can be understood: as a network of associations, where movements and schools are created by authors who throughout their career use these associations to consolidate their position or strengthen them. Critics do the same, being involved in two processes of production: they materialise their thoughts on the literary world in reviews, but in doing so, they also classify the literary world: thus are involved in symbolic production (Van Rees, 1987; Janssen, 1997).

Classification can differ between contexts, such as places, time periods, etc., as shown by for instance Baumann (2001) and Van Venrooij and Schmutz (2010). The latter authors develop a highly detailed evaluation scheme that distinguishes between highbrow and popular aesthetics, which is applied to the reviews of pop music critics, and then compared across countries. High art criteria are considered to be about technique, and are more distant, formal and intellectual; popular art criteria are functional, emotional and experiential. In their research, Van Venrooij and Schmutz make the point that the way aesthetic criteria are used, and what kind of criteria are adopted, signifies the place in which we can find high art or popular art forms. When different languages are adopted to describe the one or the other, different values are attributed to them thus keeping them separated from each other and thus shaping classifications and therefore the hierarchical positions of the popular and high forms. In a similar vein, Wright (2006) emphasises how such social and public structures (and indeed, the way these attribute value to cultural products) highly define what is worth reading. He found proof of a strong literary canon: literary classics are better-known than books selected to represent popular taste. In this, again, we find emphasis on the relation between expression of criteria and value attributed.

Not only do professional critics play a key role in classifying culture, they themselves are also subject of classification and legitimisation (Verboord, 2009) whilst simultaneously evaluating cultural goods and discussing the boundaries of genres in which they should be considered and looked at. With the rise of the cultural omnivore and the decline of boundaries between commercial and symbolic value (Verboord, 2011) one can wonder whether the literary field still functions in the same way as described by Bourdieu. Yet, the notion of critics, being part of and shaping the literary world is a premise still withstanding. Who this critic is, and whether s/he should be institutionally embedded (e.g. be part of a network of experts) or even be professional (e.g. work for a newspaper) to be considered trustworthy, is the question. Especially considering the presumed diminishing role of the professional critics (Keen, 2007): studying aesthetic criteria of consumers instead might be more insightful to study value and meaning simultaneously. As Verboord (2009) demonstrates, legitimacy of professional critics has not changed much, yet there has been room for acknowledging other types of critics as well.

In particular, there is one development that has put pressure on this professional or institutional embeddedness: the rise of online media that have given lay persons the opportunity to also share evaluations with mass audiences. This will be discussed in the next section.

2.3 The rise of the critical online consumer and the diminishing role of the professional critic

In MacDonald's (2007) 'Death of the critic' the author brings into memory the 18th Century salons as an intellectual movement from below, democratising and revolutionising taste making. One could say that a similar revolution is now taking place (or has for some time) in the role of new and social media that allows consumers to review just about everything. MacDonald makes a passionate plea for the upkeep of the role of the critic, and insists from the start of the book that without the critic cultural consumers would not be challenged to think outside the realm of their own values and interpretations. MacDonald strongly disagrees with the viewpoint of for instance Carey (2006), who sees cultural values as mere individualist and subjective matters of taste: one's taste is as important as another one's.

Although MacDonald is firmly dismissive in accepting the importance of amateur taste, Holbrook and Addis (2007) have found that ordinary consumers show good taste in relation to what experts' judgements of good taste is. There is a strong relation between what those with a trained eye, the critical experts, and ordinary people view as 'good'. An important explanation is expertise. Beaudouin and Pastier (2016) found in a large-scale study of online reviews that the more often an author posts a review, the more alike professional critique it will be both in form and in criteria.

With online reviews, readers no longer depend upon newspapers or other professional media to receive aesthetic judgments on cultural products (Verboord, 2013). Thus, readers now

have easily accessible reviews on the books they are interested in and are guided in what to read next, thanks to suggestions and best-of lists. Social media, such as GoodReads.com, have increased this even further.

However, one could, of course, debate whether accessibility and a large supply of reviews makes up for what some regard as a lesser quality of reviews. David and Pinch (2005) are quite critical of online reviews after establishing that around one percent of them is either plagiarised, contains self-promotion, or is part of a personal vendetta against the author. In their research the motives behind writing reviews that are not merely selfless in character, are mentioned, such as reviewers being exclusively positive about each book they read simply to improve their own rating as reviewer on the website.

Underlining David and Pinches claim, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) observe that reviews are well-read by others, and have an overwhelmingly positive bias, with positive reviews greatly improving the sale of a book. Negative reviews however, create even more impact.

Kovács and Sharkey (2014) have found that winning literary awards can lead to a more negative reviewing online of these books. Explanation for this is two folded. First, winning prized could attract a reader's audience with a dissimilar taste to that of the book. Second, something being popular or well-liked also generates the 'snob-effect': some people tend to dislike or are more critical of something that reeks of mass-popularity.

Yoo and Gretzel (2008) have found the same positive attitude in another field of online reviews, that of travelling websites: 'Venting negative feelings through postings is clearly not seen as an important motive' (283). One of the reasons is that readers tend to gravitate towards books that lay close to their taste and preferences. Other reasons for writing reviews also explain this predominate positive attitude towards products under scrutiny, which is something to keep in mind when researching reviews. Motivations to write reviews are diverse, according to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), but consumers are mostly motivated by the social aspect of online reviewing, their concern for others, and to feel more self-worthy in doing so. Cheung and Lee (2012) found a similar result, the enjoyment of helping others and interacting with other as well as gaining some form of acknowledgment were important in writing reviews. This again stresses the notion of the social aspect of reading: online reviewing is a social activity, carrying a multitude of motivations and constraints possibly influencing the review.

And lastly, it stresses the importance to research online reviews not solely as a social way to make meaning, but to also delve in the aesthetic criteria instrumental in voicing their opinion.

3. Methods and data collection

To research reviewers' meaning and value attributions of books, online reviews will be collected through the website of GoodReads.com. Kovács and Snarkey (2014) claim that GoodReads is a good representation of book readers, at least in the U.S. GoodReads can be considered to be a social media environment especially dedicated to literary reading, existing of mostly user-generated content in an atmosphere especially designed for this purpose (Vlieghe et al., 2016).

The main advantage of a content analysis of online reviews over other possible qualitative methods, such as interviewing or conducting focus groups, is the unobtrusive nature of studying how people talk naturally about books. Note that Liebes and Katz (1986), who wrote one of the classic studies studies on meaning making in the field of media, already made a plea to do so when studying reception of cultural products, yet were unable at the time due to the lack of technical possibilities.

I will look at the differences between those books that are considered critically acclaimed (hence they have been recognised for their excellence by experts and those deemed important in the literary field), and those that can be considered popular (hence, they are read by a large audience).

The former category is operationalised by looking at price-winners of well-known literary prizes that have been judged by a committee of experts. The second category is operationalised by selecting best-sellers. Since goodreads.com is a good representation of book readers in the U.S., I have decided to focus on U.S.'s prizes and bestsellers. A practical constraint is also resolved by this focus: bestselling and prizewinning books from other countries usually have little English-written reviews, since they are not always translated or published outside their country of origin.

For literary prizes, the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award both in the category fiction are selected. Verboord (2011) provides an order of prizes in terms of their importance and fame: their overall prestige in the field. According to this scale, these two prize have the highest prestige in the U.S.. The highest prestige in bestseller lists in the U.S. belongs to the New York Times: its longest running bestseller list in the country is regarded as being highly authoritative (297).

| | Prizewinner books | | Bestseller Books |
|------|--|---|---|
| | Winner of the Pulitzer Price, category fiction | Winner of the National Book, category fiction | Most weeks on number 1 NY Times Bestseller List (amount of weeks) |
| 2014 | The Gold Finch - Donna Tart | Redeployment - Phil Klay | The Gold Finch - Donna Tart (4) Gone Girl - Gillian Flynn (4) Sycamore Row - John Grisham (3) Outlander - Diana Gabaldon (3) |
| 2013 | The Orphan Master's Son - Adam Johnson | The Good Lord Bird - James McBride | Safe Heaven - Nicholas Sparks (7) Inferno - Dan Brown (4) |
| 2012 | no award | The Round House - Louise Erdich | Fifty Shades of Grey - E.L. James (28) |
| 2011 | A Visit From Goon Squad - Jennifer Egan | Salvage The Bones - Jesmyn Ward | The Help - Kathryn Stockett (15) Water for Elephants - Sare Gruen (8) |
| 2010 | Tinkers - Paul Harding | Lord of Misrule - Jaimy Garden | The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest - Stieg Larsson (8) |
| 2009 | Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout | | |

Table 1. List of selected prizewinner and bestseller books.

The division of best sellers books in an uneven distribution among the years 2010-2014 is a deliberate one: I have chosen to use the 'most weeks on number 1' criteria as my key selector. Therefore, four books have been selected for 2014, and only one for 2012. The success of Fifty Shades of Grey topping the best seller list for a staggering 28 weeks was so incomparable with all the other best sellers of that year, whilst in 2014 the margins were drawn so much closer, that is only seemed a fair representation to not choose just one book in 2014 or multiple books in 2012. Since my research is one of qualitative design, a representation that does justice to the very homogeneous literary landscape of 2012 as Fifty Shades of Grey-year and 2014 as a more heterogeneous and more divided literary market seems in order.

As can be seen, in 2009 no Pulitzer Price was awarded, since the professionals on the board could not agree on a convincing winner. Therefore, the winner of 2009 Olive Kitteridge was added to the selection, in order to have as much Pulitzer Price winners as National Book Award winners. Summed up, prizewinning books thus equal the number of bestseller books: both categories consist of ten books.

A minimum of 10 reviews per books are selected in the first round of analysis. After the second and third round, 238 reviews in total were analysed until data-saturation was reached and no further code-additions were needed. The reviews were selected at random, ordering the reviews of books per date and spreading out the intervals so that an even distribute in dates would ensure. This surpasses the possible pitfall of selecting 'elite' reviewers (Beaudouin & Pasquier, 2016), that might come up when we leave the GoodReads selection setting on the standard

‘Default’-setting. GoodReads uses a non-specified algorithm in this Default-setting to decide which reviews GoodReads visitor encounter first. The reviews should meet the criteria of having a minimal length of 8 sentences (a requirement set after an initial test of coding, after noticing too little meaning in anything shorter) and the language being in English. When either of these criteria was not met, the next review on the page was selected instead.

The collected data was analysed with the help of the software Atlas TI in a bottom-up style coding, ensued by a more deliberate thematic matter of coding. Before starting I had comprised a list of themes and codes I had expected to encounter based on the literature review (predominantly from research dealing with value in film critic, such as Kersten and Bielby (2012)), on the properties of cultural products; as well as research dealing with a more meta-level manner in which the public can relate to cultural products (involvement or distancing, literal and non-literal, see (Liebes & Katz, 1986)). Whilst coding I added to these initial themes, or abandoned them altogether, created other definitions of codes, separated codes into sub-codes, or merged and collected smaller frequented codes together; to come to a different framework altogether.

Consistency was ensured by revisiting the documents and the code-book throughout the process. Working with overarching themes, illustrated in mind maps as suggested by Matthews and Ross (2010), three recurring ‘dimensions’ were found, that will be discussed below. Additionally, I would go over all the quotations marked by one particular code to make sure coding was done systematically. This ensured that codes were used consistently to signal similar meanings or other attributes of the reviews. It also allowed to re-assess certain codes and to define them with more care.

487 codes were used for 2127 quotations, divided into 29 groups. Most quotations were coded with more than one code; and some codes could belong to more than one group. The code ‘No recognition in character’ for instance first belonged to the bigger code-group of ‘character’. This overarching code-group did not suffice, since the codes in it were so different in their content. Where some quotations were marked with codes of reviewers being critical of the actions of the characters in the book, some codes took up a more technical critique on the narrative voice of one of the characters: in essence critiquing the writing-style of the author rather than the fictional action of the characters. Thus the code-groups ‘Character’ was divided up into three new code-groups, one focusing on the literal and emotional comments and critique reviewers had on the characters; the other focusing on the technical component of the writing style of the author, and in the last category, all quotations were bundled that took up a more descriptive approach. By using multiple codes per quotations, nuanced meaning could be re-created, thus allowing for the fact that some quotations dealt both with the literal aspect of a story, as well as critiquing the writing style at once. More code groups dealing with the properties of the book could be divided up in these three types

of critique: literal, technical and descriptive. These multi-layered styles of discussing one aspect of a story - for instance 'character' - shows that the analysis should do justice to exactly these nuances. This will be discussed next.

4. Reporting results: three dimensions.

To accurately report these nuanced understandings of codes and combination of codes, this result-section has been divided into three parts. Three main themes, or dimensions, emerge from the data. The term 'dimension' does justice to the multi-layered way in which reviewers express their views. These dimensions cannot be seen as separate entities but dividing them as such, will bring clarity in how reviewers connect to books in general, the GoodRead community more specifically, and the particular books under review in principal essence.

4.1 Dimension 1: Offering a context for reviews

Earning credentials as a critic is nowadays earned by mere participation, according to David and Pinch (2005). However, just participating does not provide the readers of reviews with enough information. Therefore, reviewers show great awareness of the context in which they write their review and actively vocalise their previous reading experience, usual reading preference and knowledge of the literary field. In doing so, they provide the GoodRead community with additional information besides the 1-5 star rating, so very needed for readers to understand if the book suits their taste (Blank, 2006).

A common reflexive argumentation of reviewers is mentioning how experienced they are as readers. By providing their GoodReads community with a sense of their reading experience, therefore contextualising their opinion, they provide the community with tools to assess whether or not they should take the review to heart. '*I've read other long books*' (Heather, 2014) can be seen as a presumed justification from the reviewer that they indeed do sometimes read long books, but this book was actually too long altogether, even for those who might enjoy long books.

The way reviewers contextualise their opinion differs between bestseller reviewers and prizewinning reviewers, as we will see, but is apparent in most reviews, whether more obvious or more subtle.

4.1.1 The context of prizewinner reviews: experience, literary context and relativity of taste

Reviewers of prizewinning books are more vocal in explaining their expertise both as readers, for instance name-dropping titles they have read, and as experts of certain topics or places central in the books. Yet, while they make their experience and knowledge known, reviewers also mention the limitations of their knowledge: '*And after having studied Korean culture for a long time, and dating Korean girls (though that doesn't qualify me to know the minds of all Koreans, believe me, I'm well aware of this (...))*'. (Derek Vasconi, 2015)

By referring to their expertise they are able to let others know how they should be perceived as reviewers and whether or not their opinion is worthwhile. 'Worthwhile' is a term they themselves often use in describing a book: prize winners' books might be hard work and not always '*a light read*' (Matthew, 2013), but somehow still worth the time and effort: '*In summary, it's potent chapters like this that make unimpressive novels like this entirely worth one's while, and I'm happy to have forged through for it.*' (Landon Kramer, 2015)

By providing a contextualisation for their opinion, prizewinner reviewers thus secure a place in the GoodReads community for themselves and for the book and signal how their reviews should be perceived and, consequently, how the book itself should be perceived. This contextualisation takes on three forms.

First, reviewers provide a personal context in which they either state their previous reading experience or their experience in certain fields or places, thus signalling whether or not their opinion should be regarded as being important and coming from someone knowledgeable. Noticeably, any experience is worth mentioning, even being slightly familiar with an environment reminiscent with the atmosphere in the book: '*Lord of Misrule* is about horse racing in West Virginia. *It admirably toggles between different characters at the race track with excellent local vernacular (having spent some time in West Virginia, not necessarily at race tracks, but a little watching trotters in Western Pennsylvania).*' (L, 2011) or, '*(...) because I really did spend a significant piece of my childhood hanging out in an overcrowded shop full of 18th century antiques--Thanks Nana.*' (Alison, 2013).

Second, reviews sometimes provide a context for the book in a wider literary context. By comparing the book to other literary work - especially from other authors, whereas bestseller reviews more often compare books to other books from the same author - it signals something both about the reviewer, who is apparently able to look beyond the letter of the book by drawing comparisons to other books, but more importantly, it provides GoodRead users with a literary context. Comparisons to other books are common, as are comparisons to literary styles: '*Whilst others thought it was Dickensian. I thought it only resembled Dickens in the length. His writing style, characterization and description is far superior.*' (Jovdb, 2015) and '*A Visit From The Goon Squad* is very well-written. *It follows the Quirky New Yorkers model of contemporary American fiction rather than the Multi-Generational Immigrant Family Saga model, charting the lives and fates of a group of loosely connected people between the 1970s and the 2020s.*' (Mitchell, 2015),

Reviewers of prizewinner books do not shy away from also stating shortcomings in their experience and knowledge: '*I suspect that maybe a deeper knowledge (appreciation?) of some Russian lit might've helped me out.*' (Grace S., 2015). This does however presumably not undermine their worth as a reviewer for the GoodReads community: reflexive statements about the

reviewers' knowledge, or in this case, a self-admitted lack thereof, would strengthen the reviewers accountability and credibility.

A third form of contextualisation is the referral to taste. Readers of prizewinners more often describe taste in relative terms. Taste is personal, and therefore explaining whether the book was *according to them* worth the work, or worth re-reading, or worth the prize-winning is paramount. ('*Other people liked it. Oprah liked it. It wasn't terrible. It wasn't like a Tami Hoag or Dan Brown book. Other people might like it. I just didn't.*' (Rita, 2009))

Yet, while taste is relative and personal, taste is also somewhat of a status marker. Referring to other author's work is done commonly, whether to contrast it or to draw parallels and by doing so, reviewers are able to show the GoodReads community not only what they know and what they have read before, but also how their good taste sets them apart. The following quote is illustrative in this sense: '*And then it's also a bestseller, with over 20,000 GR ratings as I write this, and I shy away from crowds, he sniffed*' (Tony, 2014). This reviewer, writing about the book The Orphan Master's Son, speaks of the initial disdain he feels when reading books that are praised by a larger public and then goes on to compare the reading experience with this book with '*one of my earliest reading experiences. I was 6 or 7*', describing how even back then his taste for books was something that set him apart. By doing so, reviewers are actively engaging in a form of distinction. Or, as Kovács and Sharkey would name it, it signals the so-called 'snob-effect': some people tend to dislike something that reeks of mass-popularity (2014).

In sum, contextualisation of the opinion of prizewinners reviewers takes on the form of establishing one's expertise and experience, providing a literary context in which the book should be considered, and lastly, offers a chance for reviewers to discuss the relativity of taste, and in doing so, can differentiate from others by priding themselves for their 'good' taste. As Vlieghe et al. (2016) have found, social media is, among other things, a place to create identity. They link this creation of identity on social media sites dedicated to discussing literary works to a Bourdieuan need to display cultural consumption and cultural capital. Reviewers thus use these places to create distinction, for instance in making sure their reviews are well-written. Bestsellers engage differently to literary works: they offer different contexts, as we will see next.

4.1.2. The context of bestseller reviews: genres

In reviews of bestsellers we find more absolute terms in explaining whether reviewers like a book. These reviewers refer to certain standards that books should meet in order to be worthwhile. In other words, in reviews of bestseller books we find more general statements about what a good book should or should not comprise. '*The one thing that I have against all of Nicholas Sparks' works is that they lack a major, integral part of romance writing: butterflies.*' (race, 2014)

According to some readers, books need certain characteristics and need to oblige to certain standards to be considered part of the genre: ‘*(...) of course, who says “novel with historical fiction” often says “bad guy”.*’ (Agathe, 2015) or to be considered good: ‘*As is typical for a crime novel, a moment of relief arrives, but this perfect crime only teases you to a possible coming of a tidy solution.*’ (port22, 2015).

These general statements about characteristics books need are found less in prizewinners review. While prizewinners reviewers mention whether or not something is a recommendation and perhaps ‘worth the work’, they stop at that. Bestsellers’ reviews more often recommend with a warning: they recommend books for lovers of the genre, or lovers of previous work of the author. ‘*If you’re into detailed passionate, sexual, romantic love affairs - then this book is definitely for you!*’ (Natalie Smith, 2015) This pre-occupation with the genre could explain why they more often talk about quality in absolute terms: within certain genres certain characteristics and plots are expected and appreciated, and sometimes even demanded. ‘*(...) it wouldn’t be a story without a love triangle.*’ (Kim Ciara, 2014) Lacking one of these characteristics, commonly leads to a lower rating. The reflexivity in bestseller reviews should be seen in the context of these demands, linked to genre-characteristics.

Books can thus be recommended to lovers of the genre, and books can be compared with other books of the same author or within the same genre. Drawing comparisons to work of other authors or to other cultural work as is commonly done in reviews of prizewinner’s books, is done less so by bestseller reviewers: it is important to just know whether one should read the new Nicholas Sparks book if they have enjoyed the previous books by him: ‘*If you like Nicholas Sparks books, don’t forget to read this one*’. (Princess Bookie, 2013), there is apparently less need to draw comparisons beyond the writer, let alone, beyond the genre-boundaries.

Drawing comparisons to other books from the same author can lead to disappointments when expectations are not met, leading to a lower rating. And whilst in prizewinner reviews high expectations could also lead to disappointment, in bestseller books these expectations are based on previously reading books from the same author. Consequences of unmet expectations are lower ratings, and again a clear-cut conclusion: not recommending the book and instead, perhaps recommending other books from the same author. ‘*I have enjoyed Dan Brown books in the past but this one has put me off any future releases. It just felt like he needed to show off his knowledge, at the cost of a storyline.*’ (Deb, 2015) and, about the same book, Dan Brown’s Inferno: ‘*You can really enjoy the book if you leave out any expectations.*’ (Shyam Mohan, 2015).

These bestseller reviews can be considered more instrumental and practical: they are written so readers can assess whether they should read the book, and not to provoke elaborate

discussions about the relativity of taste or whether unenjoyable books are still worth the work. Bestseller reviews seem less concerned with those issues.

While we have seen that prizewinner reviewers in contextualising their reviews are also aware of forces in the literary field (by for instance comparing authors and writing-styles), bestseller reviews state this awareness of the literary world by offering a genre-context. Attributing certain genres to books is seemingly done with confidence and the distinction between genres is usually quite clear-cut. Still, reviewers come up with creative ways to determine the genre: *'Is there a name for the genre that uses time-travel as its device to juxtapose clashing cultures, but is otherwise historical fiction?'* (Sheffy, 2015) whilst another reviewers describes the same book with: *'What this book isn't : Attention, I want to precise that, in spite of this flashback, this true time travel, this book doesn't really belong to the fantasy genre. The writer only uses this trick to build up her literary plot. It's more of a historical fiction: fictional characters enclosed in History (with a big H).'* (Agathe, 2015) . An accurate description of the genre is important because it will help the GoodRead community to determine whether or not it matches their taste and if they should therefore read it or not. In other words, relativity of taste is a topic less debated, setting out genre-descriptions and boundaries on the other hand is.

In another review however, a reader mentions the downside of regarding all books in terms of genre: *'I will no longer turn my nose at "female romance novels", (...) it does her series and writing style a dis-service to think of them only as "romance novels".'* (Lisa Dalin, 2008). This is a true exception however, since most reviewers do not doubt the self-evident matter in which they make statements about the books and their genre. Another exception is the referral to what can be considered a literary classic in a bestseller review: *'While the narrative is set up as an epic story (Homer was writing short stories compared to this) their is lots of action without the plot getting much closer to a resolution.'* (Lisa Dalin, 2008). Usually, bestseller reviewers refer to books from the same author, or in more rare cases to books within the same genre, but only unusually refer to anything outside these two.

The awareness of a literary field among bestseller reviewers is mostly considered in the context of genre, but is found on another level too. A mentioning of the books not being fine literature is commonly found *'(Is this book literary caviar? No. But it's a damn fine pizza.'* (Brentley, 2015)), but is also easily disregarded as being unimportant. Unimportant, yet sometimes for the sake of one's reputation still something to be considered: *'(...) but Outlander is probably one of the better books in the romance genre (which really just means that it's readable and has a cover that won't make you ashamed to be seen with it in public)'* (Nicole, 2015).

As we will see in the next dimension, more differences occur between the two review groups. Bestseller reviewers place more importance on the plot of a book and the hard work of the author, whereas prizewinner books' reviewers focus on the construction of the book and the talent of the author.

4.2 Dimension 2: The author and the story; motivations to read

Whilst showing reflexivity by contextualising their reviews, readers ultimately review the book on its content and writing. This is the second dimension found in the analysis and its results will show the differences of the valuation of content between reviewers of bestselling books and prizewinning books. The type of valuation criteria differs and so does ultimately the expression of this judgement, as we will see in the third and last dimension later on. In this dimension however, it will become clear that the difference of valuation criteria used by reviewers can be explained by their main motivations to read. Whilst bestsellers reviewers read to escape and to get away from everyday life, prizewinners reviewers strive less for an emotional experience, but seek out to have their perspectives challenged and the opportunity to learn.

Within bestseller reviews, more often do we find critique on the storyline than we do in prizewinner reviews. The main critical points are about pace and the absence of a plot. Storylines are either moving too slow, or parts of the book are unnecessary or repetitive, or the plot is not what they had expected: '(...) *I found myself a little bored at times, waiting for the "big" something that I knew was coming. With other Grisham novels, I have been suitably entertained until the "big reveal", but with Sycamore Row, I wished that things would hurry up a bit.*' (Jenn M, 2015). Or, subversively, reviewers positively critique the storyline: the fast pace and the strong ending. Interestingly, whilst negative critique is more elaborately argued, positive critique is mostly given without any examples or context: '*I really enjoyed reading this fast pace Sparks novel.*' (Divergent doc-taa, 2014) is usually all the GoodReads community needs to know this is a positive evaluation.

Criticising prizewinning books generally takes on a perspective. These reviewers focus more on the author and their strengths or weaknesses. Instead of critiquing the plot, the author and his skills are critiqued: '*I feel at times that Klay didn't know how to end some of these stories, and so they just...kinda'... fizzled... out.*' (Jeffrey, 2014). This division between focusing on the plot versus the author is clear throughout the reviews. A critique on the storyline or writing style often results in critiquing the author: '*When we add to that every male narrator who speaks in 1st person is winter still in the shit or just home from the shit, one wonders, is there any range to this book, to this writer?*' (Tonya, 2014).

And while indeed bestseller reviews sometimes also mention the author, this is done with a different framework altogether: they celebrate the hard work of the author (writing as a skill), while prizewinners' reviews celebrate the talent of an author (writing as a gift). So while a prizewinning author '(...) *has a knack for expressing the ineffable*' (Cynthia, 2010), the bestselling author gets '(...) *TREMENDOUS props for the amount of research she puts into these books*' and is respected for her effort: '(...) *this author truly WORKS to weave the characters into the history in these books and does a very solid job of it* (...)’ (Brentley, 2015). In other words, bestseller reviewers appreciate the hard work of an author, and prizewinner reviewers applaud the talent of an author. The underlying premises thus apparently differ: writing is a craft, an occupation and a skill that could be further developed for bestseller readers, whereas for prizewinner readers writing is a gift, something precious that an author possesses.

Differences in underlying premises are also found elsewhere. In bestseller reviews the focal point lies on the message of the book, rather than on the theme, which is more often mentioned in prizewinner reviews. Bestseller reviewers generally focus on the fictional characters of the book under evaluation, and the relationships formed between these characters. High ratings are given to those books who explore characters and their relationships, and allow the reader to emphasise with the main characters. Not seldom do these explorations of relationships finally result in an expression of a message within the book. A message that is clear and undisputed: '*The authors main message in the book The Help is that no matter what, blacks and whites should be treated the same.*' (Zoe C, 2015) writes one reviewer about The Help. Another reviewers concurs with this, only broadening the scope of the message, stating: '*You get to read about hate, abuse, mistrust, lies, false accusations but also about love, comprehension and friendship and although the book only touches color racism, it also leaves us with the message that we all are the same, no matter what color we are, who you sleep with, what gender you are, etc.*' (Danny Aguilera, 2015).

Generally, bestseller reviewers appreciate learning from a story with a clear and resonate message, or in a practical sense learning about a specific topic, about a different time or place: '*It was so fun to read about Florence, a place I think is just beautiful and full of cultural significance. But, he added to my meager store of knowledge tenfold.*' (Lorraine, 2015) Yet, bestseller reviewers also look for a bigger message within the books, mostly messages that teaches them about relationships.

Prizewinner reviewers value the learning-aspect of books too, but look for a new or different perspective, appreciating the challenge this brings them as readers. Rather than having a clear-cut message, prizewinner reviews mention 'theme' more often than 'message'. '*My hope in reading historical fiction is to get offered a real glimpse of the way life might have been in that time period, and in somehow break open any illusions I might had with how things might have been,*' writes

one reviewer (Gilbert, 2014), illustrating that yes, learning something about a specific topic is interesting, but they are actively seeking to have their opinions challenged. Some bestseller reviewers actively seek these challenging perspectives too. Interestingly, in both groups, we find reviewers who value books that go beyond just offering new knowledge or new insights, but also allow readers to learn a lesson about perspective. *'Yes, people can see you and think about you from different dimension. What you think about yourself might be opposite than what people think about you.'* (Hiroko, 2015). These books are considered insightful because they teach a lesson about perspective. Morality and truth are considered relative, and when the perspective changes, so could their view on what one thinks are ethically right or truthful. In bestsellers however, these insights are more often written down as 'lessons', whereas prizewinners posit these as open questions not needing an definite answer. This concurs with Long's findings (Long, 2003): books are often used as a tool for normative discussions, and readers do not just renegotiate the terms of literary standards, but also their own personal values and social identity.

So while bestseller reviewers appreciate the exploration of relationships between characters, this often debouches into a message one could learn from. Prizewinners appreciate new insights, and seek out being challenged by new perspectives. Origins of this slight difference between the two groups can be explained to originate from a difference in motivations to read.

Radway's theory (1991) on reading as an activity with social motives, rather than an isolated activity, provides us with rich insides in women's motives to read. While reading also provides needs such as re-assurance, hope-offering, teaching them life-lessons and providing validation, the act of reading as a sense of escape is the predominate reason of reading romance novels for middle-class women. *'First of all, I just want to say that this is the book what I was seeking for. So mystery, astounding, and intriguing. This book sucked all my focus, concentration and sleep length for this past one week.'* (Hiroko, 2015).

For a book to provide all these needs, some requirements should be met and the absolute terms used to describe 'what makes a good book' as seen in the first dimension are vocalised in the reviews. Besides a wish to be affected by the book, there is a appreciation for a message in the book. In prize winner reviews, the emphasis on message is replaced by an emphasis on themes, and the book having an effect on the reader in emotional terms is replaced by the book offering a new perspective and appreciating the beautiful prose.

This distinction can possibly be explained by seeing taste as a statusmarker: by reading prizewinners, readers are able to distinguish themselves and show off their 'good' taste (Vlieghe et al., 2016). But expressing this taste does not stop at just reading these books: by actively engaging in reviewing these works on formal and technical criteria, readers are able to go beyond just

passive readers, into the realm of being connoisseurs who know how to appreciate and evaluate works within the literary canon - or, as a more heterogeneous (omnivorous) consumers, setting themselves apart by consuming books that follow the tracks of the canon less rigidly. In the next dimension, we will see in a more detailed fashion how reviewers of bestsellers and prizewinners negotiate what is good by the type of terms and arguments they use. Bestseller reviewers evaluate books in literal and emotional terms, whereas prizewinner reviewers tend to use distant, formal and technical criteria. As a result, the tone of reviews also differs.

4.3 Dimension 3: Personal aesthetic criteria; relating to the book

After establishing themselves as readers and connoisseurs, positioning the book within a genre or comparing it to other books, we have yet to discuss the most direct way in which readers engage with their book: what specific criteria do they use to review it? There are differences in the aesthetic criteria used in the two groups of reviews, which will in turn also contribute to a difference in tone. Ultimately, this comes down to a difference in relating to the book.

Bestseller reviewers tend to give more literal commentary, and tend to relate to the story as if the events, proceedings and characters in the book are real. Heavy disagreements with the actions of the characters, or discussions about the motives of characters are the result. *'In fact, I spent most of the time while reading Gone Girl wanting to jump into the pages of the book and repeatedly shake every single character to saneness.'* (Alisha Marie, 2012).

This literal commentary on the book indicate bestseller reviewers wish to be emotionally affected by a book. In a lot of these reviews, readers do not vocalise anything other than literal commentary, and show no awareness of the fictional attribute of the book (which is of course not to say that they are not aware of this, they just do not express it). Liesbes and Katz's (1986) framework about interaction with a fictional story (in this case, the televised series Dallas) is useful here, making a distinction between the 'referential' frame, where people feel directly involved in the story because they relate to the story as they do to their own world, and the 'meta-linguistic' or 'critical' frame, where more distance is used and people look beyond the literal to deal with the story as an artistic construction (1986: 53).

As a result of this literal tone, sarcasm is also more prominent in bestseller reviews. Because reviewers stay close to the events in the book, sarcastically mocking the actions of one of the characters is common and contributes even further to personalising the review. Yet, it also indicates some more distance between them and the book and takes a little away from taking things too literal. Surely, being captivated by a story is wonderful, but look at those silly things the characters do, or, on a different level, look at the silly things this writer wants us to believe the characters do. *'If you can avoid all chapters featuring Robert Langdon, it's actually readable. The*

central plot is in fact interesting; overpopulation and bioterrorism, but the story is dragged out painfully. I'm running for my life, with armed forces chasing me but I'm just going to pause for SIX PAGES and reminisce about lecturing my students on this wonderful bit of architecture. (Deb, 2015). It is a playful way for reviewers to relate to the book and to signal some sort of distance between them and the book, and to them and the author. Liebes and Katz (1986) also mention this playful manner in which a referential (or literal) frame can be adopted.

This non-distant tone within bestseller reviews seem to indicate a more emotional experience of the reader. And indeed, emotional involvement with a book is commonly found in reviews: *'I just couldn't put this beautifully written book down. I was stuck with it, I read it while I was going to college in the subway, I read it when I was coming from college, I read it before sleep, I read it when I was home from college (when I should be studying or doing some homework...) I was soooo addicted to it, and I still am.'* (Orlinda Machado, 2015). Not being able to put a book down is somewhat of a recurring criteria in bestseller reviews. Books that have the ability to provoke this in readers get high ratings. This can be compared to Jenkins' (Jenkins, 1992) sense of fandom, that involves a mode of reception also filled with undivided attention and emotional responses in which fans are highly critical of what they expect from cultural texts.

In prizewinner reviews, we see this emotional criterium less frequently. Its reviewers instead focus on more distant criteria, such as a beautiful writing style, or, give books high marks that are not light reads. *'This is one of Erdrich's stronger books. It is heavy and intense with no lightness of spirit at all. I highly recommend it.'* (Bonnie Brody, 2012). When bestseller reviewers detect heaviness in books, they treat it with similar literal comment as they do with discussing the characters or their actions, commenting as if the situation is a real possibility: *'It was a dark, complex read and I really fell in love with their world. Though I know one thing for sure, I don't think I could handle living in it lol.'* (Darlin, 2015).

Although prizewinners reviewers use distant aesthetic criteria, they combine this with what seems contradictory at first: more personal remarks. More personal remarks in prizewinners reviews could be explained by their notion of taste as a mere personal opinion. So although bestseller reviewers relate to the books more personally, by for instance despairing when a character makes a silly decision, they pose their opinion in more definite terms of good or bad, of belonging to a certain genre, and of lacking certain key characteristics which would allow them to feel more personally involved in the story. Prizewinner reviewers make conscious divisions between their use of formal aesthetic criteria and their personal expression of taste, which would explain why they sometimes need to explicitly mention a certain remark is a mere personal opinion. Therefore, in analysis, we have found more personal remarks in prizewinner reviews, in

which reviewers are very explicit about stating that something is a personal remark, and should be treated as a personal remark only. On the contrary, bestsellers make implicit personal remarks in which they signal their expectations of books, made to sound as a generalised rule of thumb (*all books should...*). Again, signalling a difference in the use of a referential or a critical framework.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to address a lacuna in studies on the notion of meaning making and cultural classification. Instead of focusing on the professional critic, and its role in the literary power field, or focusing on the consumption patterns of cultural consumers in a non-personal sense, this approach allows us to study meaning making and value-attribution of book readers. Whilst this has been done before in the study of book clubs and more recently online social communities, the focal point of meaning making as a social activity implies that another aspect of cultural reception so far has been overlooked: how meanings also contain values – as emphasised by studies of cultural classification and symbolic production. By studying online reviews of prizewinner and bestseller books in a content analysis I was able to bridge the gap between meaning and value.

Analysing 238 reviews brought to light that readers actively engage in what they read, and that prizewinner reviewers do so differently from bestseller reviewers. Prizewinner reviewers use three ways of contextualising their opinion: stating their personal experience, providing a literary context, and discuss the relativity of taste. These discourses allow the reviewers to signal status markers and create an identity (Vlieghe et al., 2016) and in doing so, a form of distinction is evident. Bestseller reviews are aware of literary classifications and forces in the literary world too, yet seem to disregard this as something of unimportance. Genre boundaries and characteristics are relevant only to signal whether or not a book would match one's usual taste. This seems self-evident in the light of bestseller reviewers motivations to read: a sense of escapism is best served by books with story-lines enabling one to be moved, captured, and enlightened by written-down lessons from the (hardworking) author. Prizewinner reviewers look at authors more as artists, blessed with talent and a beautiful prosaic language, whose main task it is to challenge the readers' pre-conceived notions and encourage a new perspective. The tone of bestseller and prizewinners differ too. Bestsellers make use of a referential framework in which they more literally engage with the story and its characters, sometimes in a playful manner by responding sarcastically, sometimes in a non-distant manner. Prizewinner reviewers tend to formulate their aesthetic criteria more formally and distant, yet explicitly mentioning when they do become more personal, securing the division between technical components of their review, and the personal ones.

Fifty Shades of Grey, so noticeable present in the world of books for the last couple of years, has not gotten any special attention in this article since its reviews have proven to be little exceptional. Its reviewers expressed more extreme opinions compared to other books: one would either absolutely love the book - with a common addition of some reviewers admitting to it being their 'guilty pleasure' and being quite ashamed of liking the book so much - , and other would outright hate the book and showed strong outraged emotions in reviewing it. Besides these more extreme lovers and haters, very similar patterns could be found in analysing this book. I have found the same genre-expectations, the same escapism-motivations, the same literal approach to the book, but some more guilty-pleasure references. The three dimensions as have been discussed in this article thus apparently also hold up with reviews for the first book of the Fifty Shade trilogy.

Much of what previous meaning making research has demonstrated has come to the foreground in this analysis as well. By comparing meaning making in bestseller readers with meaning making for prizewinner readers, I have added to that knowledge, yet more remains to uncover. Therefore, the fact that Donna Tartt's The Gold Finch is present in both categories is actually a very effective illustration of this not-clear-cut division, and one that only highlights the need to think in categories that are more fluid than just having one or the other label. In an ever-developing literary world wherein boundaries might be shifting and globalisation is a force stronger than ever, and where in addition the online reviewer seems to have a strong position, more research on the relation between meaning and value is needed to study cultural classifications and taste.

Researching the aesthetic criteria and underlying premises of online reviews does not include academics to intervene in a direct matter as for instance conducting qualitative interviews, or assembling focus groups would. Therefore, reviewers' opinions about the books were given voluntary and without any incentive from the researcher. Of course, this method also implies a selection bias: we will only be able to research those reviews that have been written. Both readers who do not participate in online forums or those that do, but in a mere passive manner, are not considered in this analysis (Beaudouin & Pasquier, 2016). These passive participants also negotiate meaning actively, but just not vocalise these negotiations with the rest of the community (Van Dijk, 2009). However, the voluntary manner in which the reviewers speak of books largely outweighs this bias and offers great opportunities to researchers who no longer have to invite and thus incite readers to express their views, resulting in a more natural, albeit online and written, environment.

Another premise underlying this research is, that although in theory the 'meaning making' aspect of the reader is limitless, two other forces, namely the writer's intention and the social platform of [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) also influence readers' agency. The scope of meaning making is in

principle indefinite yet the actual text and the online surrounding (for instance [goodreads.com](#) users' policy ³) will make some meanings to come to the foreground more easily than others. These constraints are worth considering in academic research.

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It should be mentioned that online media could also possibly constrain the candid manner in which reviewers are able to express themselves, as Matthews (2015) points out about policies of [goodreads.com](#) where some say censorship is at play. Yet, she also mentions users expressing to feel little limitations in what they can and cannot say and feel they can speak candidly.

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‘Other people might like it. I just didn’t’

Negotiating meaning and value in reading bestseller and prizewinning books

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